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Idiot Lecture

Kim Mohan

The monster turned its gigantic head to one side, the better to fix its bulbous-eyed gaze on Chris Crewcut, Space Ranger, and the lovely Princess Divina who clung, oh so nimbly, to his arm for subport.

"What will we do, Cbris?" Divina wailed. A hot wind raced over the dusty surface of the desert asteroid, tousling her fine, blonde hair. "That's an Angrylohusaurus, the deadliest reptilian predator to be found in this or any other galaxy!"

"We bave nothing to worry about," Chris said, the light of courage glinting in his sharp, ice-blue eyes. "I have my trusty blastonator." So saying, he drew the deadly implement from its synth-leather holster at his lean, trim hin.

"Oh!" Divina gasped. Even the scaly-bided monstrosity seemed to pause, then continued waddling forward, its borrid jaws grinning in inbuman hunger.

"Yes." Coris nodded to binself in grin satisfaction. "The blastonator," be paused to explain, "rifles a cohesive beam of anti-neutrons down a Daedalinium resonating cylinder, where they collide with a similar stream of anti-protons, causing the interior reaction cavity to vibrate with a freq

That's the end of Chris, the end of his story, and the start (albeit rather drawn out) of this column, all about a subject I love to hate.

Some people call it "Idiot Lecture," which also happens to be the title of the above story. I don't especially like that term, because I'm never sure that someone will know what it means. (If I say that a story contains idiot lecture, am I implying that the person who wrote it is an idiot? Well, no; I have other ways to do

Usually I refer to the phenomenon as "feeding the reader," or the longer and much more descriptive "dispensing background information through dialogue." But I actually like "idiol tecture" best of all, because the term itself suggests that using this sort of writing gimmick is a stupid thing to do.

When I read a story, I like to lose myself in it. I like to get so wrapped up in it that I overlook the fact that I'm reading what someone else has written. That's usually only possible if the writer also fulfills his or her part of the bargain by telling a story that doesn't read as though it's directed to someone who exists outside the story. When I come across a passage of idiot lecture, the spell is broken: I'm instantly reminded that what I'm doing is reading a story instead of experiencing it. The spell is broken because the writer has revealed, intentionally or otherwise, that he or she is conscious of the fact that there's someone on the other end who (in the writer's judgment) needs to know something that can only be conveyed by having Character A tell Character B a piece of information that Character B already knows or should know.

"Idiot Lecture" (the story) was an actual submission to this magazine, sent in by someone I've known for a few years who thought I might get a grin out of it. Apparently he never suspected I would buy it, because when I told him I did want to use it (as a perfect lead-in to this column) he was happy to get a few bucks for it, but he politely insisted that I keep his identity a secret. He knew what he was doing, he did it for a specific purpose, and even so he doesn't want the world to know who had the audacity to out these words to paper and then, on top of that, take money for doing it.

I can't say I've never published a story (aside from the one at the start of this column) that didn't contain a little bit of idiot lecture; some of it isn't as blatant as most examples I've run across, and once in a great while there's no good way to avoid having Character A explain to Character B how a blastonator works But I can say that I've never let an author get away with idiot lecture when there was any other way to accomplish the goal of telling the reader some fact that's essential to the story. And in 99% of the cases where idiot lecture has appeared in stories I've read, the tactic was not necessary, and all it did for me was ruin my enjoyment of what I was reading-by reminding me that I was reading. +

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

Graham Greene, again: I have long found his essays and novels a source of wisdom and inspiration. This comes from his autobiographical essay, "The Lost Childhood":

"Perhaps it is only in childhood that books have any deep influence on our lives... In childhood all books are books of divination, telling us about the future, and like the fortune teller who sees a long journey in the cards or death by water they influence the future."

Greene was speaking in particular of how the books he had read in his own distant childhood in Edwardian England had sent him on the path toward becoming a writer, and had even shaped the kind of fiction he would choose to write. But not only writers, he says, are set on their paths by their early reading.

"I was safe as long as I could not read," Green tells us. "The wheels had not begun to turn—but now the future stood around on bookshelves everywhere waiting for the child to choose—the life of a chartered accountant, perhaps, a colonial civil servant, a planter in China, a steady job in a bank, happiness and misery.

..." We are stamped irrevocably in our childhoods, he says; the impressions we receive then determine the years ahead. And he offers as one epitome of that idea the startling lines from AE's poem "Germinal"—

'In ancient shadows and twilights Where childhood had strayed, The world's great sorrows were born And its heroes were made. In the lost boyhood of Judas Christ was betrayed.

Exactly so. In every childhood there is a moment when a door opens and lets the future in—and very often it is a book that provides that moment.

In the April 1992 issue of this magazine I spoke of the books in my own childhood that did that for me-retellings of the Norse and Persian legends and the poems of Homer, an obscure novel by Lewis Carroll, and a wonderful fantasy by Walter de la Mare, among others. But I didn't speak in any particular way about the science-fiction books that I stumbled upon some forty-five vears ago that sent me spiraling off into the orbit that has defined my life's career. I mentioned some Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, yes, but only in passing.

I have the actual books on my desk before me now-five of them. treasured artifacts of my childhood. Here is Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, in an undated and virtually anonymous edition published by "Books, Inc." I suspect it was given to me in 1943 or 1944. I had no idea, of course, that it was science fiction; I was not to hear that phrase itself for another couple of years. But I knew, as I read it over and over, that it was a magical tale of adventure that relied not on witchcraft and the supernatural but on a clear-eyed comprehension of

the real world. Verne's crisp technical descriptions ("Besides other things the nets brought up, were several flabellariae and graceful polypi, that are peculiar to that part of the ocean. The direction of the Nautilus was still to the southeast. It crossed the equator December 1. in 142 degrees latitude; and on the fourth of the same month we sighted the Marquesas group . . .") provided so plausible a texture of verisimilitude to my science-oriented mind that I took it quite for granted when Captain Nemo made a side trip to visit the sunken ruins of Atlantis in his submarine. Verne's underwater tour of the world showed me our planet as a place of marvels populated by hordes of extraordinary creatures. Somehow, unawares, I learned the distinction between fantasy and science fiction even then, and my mode of writing was determined in that moment, years before I even knew I was going to be a writer.

Then here is Donald A. Wollheim's The Pocket Book of Science Fiction, The Pocket Book of Science Fiction, first of all paperback of anthologies. The copyright date is 1943, but my edition is a 1947 printing, and that must be when I discovered it and paid my twenty-five cents. Ten stories, here; one of them was by H. G. Wells, whom I had already discoveered in the public library, (I had read The Time Machine, at least, by 1946, though it would be years before I owned a copy myself.) I knew Wells's name was a mark of quality

in this peculiar kind of literature for which I already knew I had a predilection; but I discovered other writers in Wollheim's anthology, toosomeone named Theodore Sturgeon, and Stanley G. Weinbaum, and Robert A. Heinlein. I wasn't sure how to pronounce Heinlein's name, but his whacky fourth-dimensional story. "-And He Built a Crooked House," gave me immense pleasure. So did Sturgeon's powerful "Microcosmic God," and Weinbaum's joyous "A Martian Odyssev." And then there was T. S. Stribling's long, mysterious "The Green Splotches," which I now know to be a classic early sf story by a once-famous mainstream writer.

My head reeled with wonders. I was thrown into a fever of excitement. My yearning for the world of the distant future was so powerful that I could taste and touch and smell it. Off I went to the book department at Macy's, and stumbled at once into Portable Novels of Science. edited by-Wollheim again! In it was Wells's First Men in the Moon, and John Taine's epic of time travel and dinosaurs, Before the Dawn, and Lovecraft's spooky The Shadow Out of Time, and above all Olaf Stapledon's tale of super-children, Odd John, which seemed to speak directly to lonely, maladjusted, high-I.O. twelve-year-old me.

The damage was completely done. Not content to read these stories. I had to recreate them in my own words. I started writing imitations of the stories that had most moved me in Wollheim's second book: fragmentary Lovecraftian visions of the far future, time-machine epics replete with Mesozoic scenery, moody tales of the emotional problems of young supermen. I have no idea where any of these things are today-no doubt they would enliven someone's doctoral thesis on my life and works. But I scribbled away with enormous energy, reliving the stories I had come to love by paying them the sincerest form of flattery.

I had thought all along that I was going to be a scientist when I grew up, by the way. A paleontologist, most likely, or perhaps a botanist. And so I was startled, one day in 1948, when a school adviser who had spoken recently to my father said, "Your parents seem to think you're going to be a writer. Do you think that's so?"

I was astounded. A writer? It had never crossed my mind! "I'm planning to go into science," I told her in bewilderment. But apparently I was the only one who hadn't seen the obvious. That day was a pivotal one in my life-one of those profound Greeneian moments when the future reaches toward a child and engulfs him. I have never forgotten the confusion in which I said to myself, "They think I'm going to be a writer? Are they serious? Could I be a writer? Am I a writer already? Maybe I am." And the mechanism began to tick in me. Paleontology's loss was science fiction's gain, that day in 1948-for, now that the suggestion had been openly made, I embraced it as though it was what I had had in mind all along. Which very likely I

The next two books confirmed the addiction and thrust me further along the path. One was Groff Conklin's A Treasury of Science Fiction, with stories by Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, L. Sprague de Camp, Murray Leinster, Jack Williamson, and a good many more of my future demigods. (And one great story, "Vintage Season" by the pseudonymous "Lawrence O'Donnell," to which I would write a sequel, forty years later.) Hardly had I plumbed the depths of the Conklin anthology when I found another and even more astonishing book, the classic Healy-McComas Adventures in Time and Space, which dazzled me beyond repair with Heinlein's "By His Bootstraps" and del Rey's "Nerves" and Hasse's "He Who Shrank" and van Vogt's "Black Destroyer" and de Camp's "The Blue

Giraffe" and a passel of others that I read until I knew them virtually by heart. (Among them was one called "Nightfall," by someone with the odd name of Asimov. I lived long enough to help turn that one into a novel. You live long enough and the strangest things happen to you.)

What those two anthologies told me, other than renewing my belief that science fiction was a wondrous thing that expanded my fledgling mind toward the infinite, was that there was such a thing as sciencefiction magazines. Cannily I looked at the copyright lines of the stories in the books and found their names: Amazing Stories, Planet Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, and above all Astounding Science Fiction, where perhaps seventy-five percent of all the stories I had most admired had originated. I rushed out and bought them-and began to buy back issues too-and neglected my homework to read them late at night-and sent the editors my crude and pitiful little

And—well—my parents were right. Evidently I was thinking of becoming a writer. Before me on my desk are the five books that did it to me. As Graham Greene put it, the future had been standing around no bookshelves everywhere waiting for this child to choose. And choose it I did, in a double sense of the word. Once I had those five books in my possession my future was determined, and it was to be a future of seience-fiction writing.

The process never stops. Books did it for Graham Greene; books and sf magazines did it for me. Somewhere, right now, someone as young and impressionable and alerminded as I was in 1947 is picking up this glossy issue of AMAZING® Stories and staring at it in growing excitement and curiosity. And in that moment of mounting wonder was the winner of the Hugo Award for AD. 2032 decided. •

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My Life as a Child

Thomas M. Disch

I was born a world ago, on February 2, 1940, in Des Moines, Iowa, a city I left a few weeks later and have never returned to, though my growing-up was done nearby, in different parts of Minnesota. In the world of 1940 many things that people take for granted nowadays didn't existor else, like television, they were still so unusual they still seemed like science-fiction ideas. Over the next five years the largest war in human history was fought, but it scarcely made a dent on my pre-kindergarten consciousness, since my father, who was born in 1898, was too old to be drafted into the army. He worked as a traveling salesman, selling subscriptions to a weekly magazine that no longer exists. Collier's. Even the kind of magazine that Collier's was no longer exists. Door-to-door salesmen are likewise an almost extinct species.

My earliest clear memories are of places more than of people. I have no recollection of my grandfather. for instance, the one I'm named after, Thomas Disch, even though I can remember visiting his corner grocery store in Minneapolis and being given a strawberry ice cream cone straight from heaven. An unforgettable ice cream cone, but my grandfather? I have no idea what he was like. A Catholic certainly, we Disches were all Catholics, but a pious kind of Catholic like his wife and his daughters Cecelia and Aurelia, or a careless kind of Catholic like my father? I can't say. Republican or Democrat? I don't know. Was he a

fun-lover and a teller of jokes like my father, or a sourpuss like his wife? And for that matter, was Grandma Disch aluxays such a sourpuss, or was that the result of her being crippled and having to hobble around on a cane? And when, and how, had she been crippled?

All of those questions I might have asked my father, since he didn't die till 1980, but I never got around to it. I didn't often have the chance to be inquisitive, since I've been living in New York City, or else in Europe, ever since leaving high school in 1957. The distance between New York and Minnesota was a lot greater back then, almost two days on a Greyhound bus instead of two or three hours on a plane. I didn't often visit, and when I did I still had the teenage attitude that the past was something to escape from, not to take an interest in. So all I know about earlier Disches and Gilbertsons (my mother was born Helen Gilbertson) is the little I remember from what I was told as a child.

The Gilbertsons—Grandma and Grandpa—lived on a farm near Lake Mille Lacs in the middle of Minnesota. For one beautiful summer and fall when I was eight years old, my grandparents moved off their farm and we moved in—my Mom and Dad and me and my three-year-old twin brothers, Greg and Jeff. It was like moving backwards in time.

There was no electricity, no running water, no bathtub or indoor toilet.

My mother cooked, as Grandma Gil-

bertson always had, on a woodburning stove. We got our water from a pump located a good long carry from the house. There was a small icehouse behind the farmhouse filled with great blocks of ice cut from the nearly lake when it froze over during the winter, and that's how things were kept cold. There was a root cellar under the kitchen for keeping things like potatoes and apples, and shelves and shelves of Mason jars filled with the fruits and vegetables from our own erormous garden.

I was old enough to help with all the basic chores, pumping and carrying water, bringing in wood from the woodpile that was stacked alongside the icehouse to help keep it cool in the summer, weeding the garden, feeding the rabbits in the hutch. But they didn't really seem like chores. It was all a great adventure, a nonstop camping trip, a summer vacation in the Garden of Eden. Beyond our garden were orchards and pastures and beyond those were woods and swamplands that I could explore all summer long. Only once did I get lost and have to be returned home by neighbors whose farm I'd found my way to miles away from where I'd started out.

Years later, when I was a lad of 48.1 rented a summer cabin in the Poconos Mountains north of New York City, and though the cabin wasn't that much like the Gilbertson farm, it was surrounded by woods that I could explore every day. My

biggest wish now, nine years later, is to get my own farmhouse in the same general area, one that will be even more like the Gilbertson farm than the cabin was, even more like the Garden of Eden. The one big difference, of course, is that I wouldn't try to get along without electricity. I can't imagine not starting off the day with a slice of toast, and for toast you need a toaster, and toasters need electricity.

Yes, I'm the writer who wrote The Brave Little Toaster and its sequel, The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars. I've written many other books as well-25 and then some-but as a writer of books for children I'm one of those people like Lewis Carroll who are best known for a single pair of books that feature the same character. His Alice, like my toaster, had adventures in a world that is just like the world we're used to-with just one or two small differences, such as that animals and flowers are able to talk. In my book, appliances can talk as well-as I'm sure they would have in Lewis Carroll's books, except that he lived in a world like Grandma Gilbertson's in which appliances didn't exist vet.

The thing is, as everyone below the age of 10 knows quite well, anything and everything can talk quite clearly, if one just has the patience, and the imagination, to listen, It's all a matter of pretending. Children are the best pretenders, and writers of children's books are probably next best, (Writing books for grown-ups usually doesn't take as much pretending, which is why books for grownups are usually more like newspapers, dull in the way that everyday life can be dull.) I'd go so far as to say that to write children's books well. some part of you has to remain a child and stay behind in first grade forever. Maybe fifth grade, but that's stretching it, since a lot of fifth graders are already three-fourths adult with their own opinions about the federal deficit and the ozone laver and other newspapery concerns. So the story of how I came to

write *The Brave Little Toaster* and so many other books is a history of my pretendings, and that history begins at 10 A.M. on Saturday mornings be-

side the radio in our sun porch (which was also my bedroom) at 4104 Bryant Avenue South, in Minneapolis. That was when they broadcast the radio program Let's Pretend, with a different fairy tale dramatized each week. I would stare into the green light above the radio dial. which looked exactly like a large cat's eve, and watch the program on the video screen of my imagination. My favorite stories were "Hansel and Gretel," "Rumpelstiltskin," and "Why the Sea Is Salt." Also "The Bremen Town Musicians," which is about a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster, all of whom have reached retirement age and are afraid of being put away or made into soup. So they set off for the town of Bremen, thinking to make a living as musicians. On the way they discover a den of thieves and, by joining forces, they convince the thieves that a ghost is haunting their hideout. The thieves flee, and the four animals move in. Any resemblance between that story and The Brave Little Toaster is not purely coincidental. Because when I first had the idea for writing about my own toaster . . .

Ah, but that's getting ahead of the story. Back at 4104 Bryant Avenue South, during the summer of 1946, there was a polio epidemic. Thanks to Dr. Jonas Salk, who discovered a vaccine that can keep people from getting the crippling disease whose full name is poliomyelitis, we no longer hear that much about polio. but in 1946 people were terrified of it. It was contagious, and young children were its victims of choice. (Another name for it was infantile paralysis.) Those worst afflicted often had to spend the rest of their lives inside metal cylinders called "iron lungs," which took over the mechanical work of breathing, So, because of the epidemic, I had to spend all the summer between kindergarten and first grade indoors.

Driving my mother crazy. Let's Pretend was only on the radio on Saturday mornings. On weekdays there was nothing to listen to but soap operas. Soap operas bored me. I wanted fairy tales. I wanted animal sories like Rambi. Even the books my father liked to read aloud to me when he was home in the evenings, books like Treasure Island and Tom Sauper, even those were okay. "Read to me," I kept begging my mother, until finally, out of pure desperation, she taught me to read the books myself.

She must have done a pretty good job, because when I entered the first grade at the start of the next school year I was skipped ahead, almost at once, to second grade. I was delighted at the idea, because the new class I was entering was making mosaics with glue and colored paper, an art form much more exciting than coloring between the lines, which is what we were supposed to be doing back in first grade. I never liked coloring between the lines, but I loved glue, and still do.

I soon developed a voracious an-

petite for books, and fortunately I was able to satisfy that appetite at a local Minneapolis library. Unfortunately for my father, the library was farther away than I was allowed to walk. (It must have been quite a long way, because my daily walk to school was twelve blocks,) So Dad would drive me to the library. One week, just a day after I'd been chauffeured to the library and back again. I announced that I needed to return to the library because I'd already finished reading all the books I'd taken out. It's not that I was such a speedy reader; I simply hadn't borrowed anything but picture books with only a sentence or two on every page. So to keep from having to drive me to the library every single day. Dad made it a rule that I wouldn't take out any more picture books. What I did take out, instead, was Jack London's The Call of the Wild, a novel whose hero is Buck, a sled dog in the Yukon Territory. Buck is also part wolf, and it's that part that the wild is calling.

I had no trouble at all identifying with Buck, and later with another of Jack London's wolf/dog heroes, White Fang (in the novel of the same name). Even before I started to read, I'd developed such a strong sense of identification with Wall Disney's Bambi that at age 4 I'd taken to grazing on grass and weeds in our back yard and come down with a case of oral

poison ivy. Sometimes one can have too much imagination. I never stopped enjoying novels with animal heroes, and though I have yet to write one myself, one of my first science-fiction stories was called "White trang Goes Dingo," and it's about people who have been brought up as pets by extraterrestrial conquerors of Earth and who come to rebel against their Leash, just the way White Fang does in Jack London's novel. As every writer knows, a good story can be told in as many different ways as there are storytellers to rettell it.

It was the summer after third grade that we moved to the Gilbertson farm, which I've already described, Then, in the fall of 1948, we moved again, this time to Fairmont, in the southwestern corner of Minnesota, at the center of the rich farming area called the Corn Belt. My father had stopped selling Collier's and now sold insulation and quonset houses, those huge buildings that look like gigantic gray tin cans that have been cut in half. Farmers use them as sheds for storing their equipment and as silos for storing grain. For a while, until the farmers in the area had all the quonset houses they needed, my father was more prosperous than he'd ever been as a magazine sales-

Fairmont was then a town of about five thousand people, with a main street about eight blocks long where all the major stores were and a railroad line bisecting it into a "right" and a "wrong" side, which was a politer way of saying richer and poorer. Originally we lived at 706 North Main, which was on the wrong side of the tracks, and in fact very near them, and near a big junkvard as well, which could be entered by means of an easily climbable tree just next to the high sheet-metal fence and which became my favorite adventure playground. We were also near the town water tower (climbable, though only on a dare, because it was a scary climb), which took its water from Lake George, where sometimes on summer mornings I caught sunfish to bring home for breakfast

The neighborhood was full of kids my own age—Linda Olson, John van Eps, the Sieberts, the Lesters-and they were all good friends, but none were classmates, because, as I noted before, we were Catholics, and so I was sent to St. Paul's Convent School on the other side of town: an easy bicycle ride in good weather. but a miserable trudge through the snow in the winter. I entered St. Paul's in fourth grade and continued there through eighth grade graduation. It was a small school with only six classrooms. Third and fourth grades were bunched up together, and seventh and eighth grades. Five nuns and one lay teacher, Miss Smith, did all the teaching, Nuns of that era had a reputation for being strict disciplinarians, and the nuns of St. Paul's were no exception. We got knocked about a fair bit, and I remember feeling a particular reverence and dread for Sister Adrianne, who was a vigorous puller and twister of ears.

The nuns' strictness had a point beyond instilling the importance of the sentence I had to write on the blackboard many hundred times, "I must learn to obey," and that point was education. And so I learned all the grade-school basics, including a solid understanding of English grammar. In that one particular I will take my oath that all 31 students in the graduating class of 1953 left St. Paul's with a firmer grasp of grammar than most college students of the 1990's. You shrug? Then you have never had Sister Fidelis teach you how to diagram sentences. At St. Paul's grammar mattered, and it still matters to me enough that I have just finished writing a whole book of poems called A Child's Garden of Grammar, which is intended to rescue things like indirect objects and auxiliary verbs from the undeserved neglect into which they have fallen. I genuinely feel that grammar can be just as much fun as, for instance, Parcheesi or Monopoly or crossword puzzles. In that respect the nuns of St. Paul's Convent School scored a success in bending my twig the way they wanted it to grow.

In other respects they were not so successful. After all, the main object of the Catholic Church in maintaining its system of parochial schools is not to produce students with a sound understanding of grammar but to instill Catholic doctrine so deeply that parochial students remain good Catholics throughout their lives. And that didn't work for me. Even in grade school I was a one-man Protestant Reformation, as a result of St. Paul's pastor, Father Laine, and the Legion of Decency's decision in 1952 to give a B rating to Cecil B. DeMille's movie The Greatest Show on Earth. Three years earlier I had been knocked out by DeMille's Samson and Delilah, and I had to see The Greatest Show on Earth. I bad to. But because of its B rating, to do so would be a mortal sin. The reason it was a B movie was because James Stewart played a man who'd become a clown because he was on the run from the police for the mercy killing of his terminally ill wife. I understood that mercy killing was a sin, but people in movies commit all kinds of sins, and I didn't think that seeing James Stewart in the movie would make me a mercy killer. So I went to the movie-and thereby committed my first mortal sin, for which, if I were to die before I got to confession. I would go to hell and suffer unspeakable torments forever

Eventually, of course, I got to confession, but it continued to seem unfair that I should suffer throughout eternity for having seen The Greatest Show on Earth. Later on, at age 15, I would reach the same conclusion as Martin Luther and Henry VIII: I was right, and the Church was wrongnot just about Cecil B. DeMille but a whole lot of other things, such as whether it was all right to have my Aunt Lorraine visit at the holidays. She'd married a man who was divorced, and in those days Catholics were under orders to treat divorced people as pariahs. Grandma Disch went to her grave without saving another word to her prodigal daughter.

In the course of time my three brothers and my sister have also left the church, and, as I've only recently discovered, so have a good many of my classmates from St. Paul's Convent School. The rebellion that stressed me out so much at age 15 seems now, 37 years later, to have

been part of a mass movement. But there is a saving among Catholics: "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," In my mind I have never stopped quarreling with Father Laine and Grandma Disch, but that quarrel now takes the form of novels and stories. Grandma Disch was resurrected to play the role of Grandma Obstschmecker in The M.D.: a Horror Story, and there is also a small part in that book for the nun I had in kindergarten who told her class (including me) that there is no Santa Claus, that Santa is a pagan myth. And the quarrel is still going on: the new novel I've just started working on is called The Priest: a Gothic Romance.

But I am once again getting ahead of my story. Childhood isn't just a matter of where you went to school and what you studied. Just as important as that, if not more so, are fun and games. Games of pretending are much more important than good penmanship and correct spelling for a future novelist, and I played them all-cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, and all possible variations of the weekly serials at the Lake Theater (where admission for the Saturday matinee was 9 cents). I also persuaded Linda Olson, who lived across the street, to let me play with her dolls, a pleasure denied to most boys once they're past the age for teddy bears. I think it's a dumb rule that says that boys shouldn't play with dolls, and now as a grown-up I am able to make my own rules, and so I live in an apartment full of pretend people and animals, including an armless, legless but still quite beautiful one-time fashion model from Gimbel's Department Store, Huguette (who was rescued literally from the gutter during Gimbel's bankruptcy). There are also a number of rabbits and elephants; two cows with a flair for inventing strange recipes (Gracie and Xanthelesma): three teddy bears: a girl pillow, Cardamum, who's studied ballet; and a boy pillow, Mother, who's written and published a book of his own called Haikus of a Pillow.

Pretend games aren't the only kind. There are also the more formal kind of games played around the table, and both the Disches and Gilbertsons were passionate card-players. Whenever Grandma Gilbertson came to visit, we would play hearts or, better vet, Scrabble, My aunts Aurelia and Cecelia developed a passion for canasta during the early 1950's, and every time we drove to Minneapolis to visit them, we would spend hours at canasta. From my father I learned most of the other card games in According to Hoyle, but his favorite was cribbage. (The cribbage board was also his preferred means of administering formal punishments, so my feelings about that game are mixed.) Crossword puzzles are a related taste I developed early and never lost. And my very first published work, for which I received a payment of \$1.00 from a puzzle magazine, was a cryptogram I constructed from a quote from Horace that I dug out of Bartlett's Familiar Ouotations.

Even in 1950, when I made that sale, \$1.00 din't stretch rep' far I had a lot of expensive tastes. Comics cost a dime, and except for the Saturday mattiness, movies were 15 cents. Candy bars were a nickel, except for a Nut Goody, which cost twice as much but was worth it. Then there were birthdays and holidays to contend with My weekly allowance was 25 cents. There was no help for it, I had to get a job.

The first job I got was delivering the Minneapolis Evening Star and the Sunday Tribune. There were about a dozen daily subscribers on my route, and some 45 people who got the Sunday papers. I figure I must have earned something less than \$2.00 a week. Eight times my allowance, but even so it wasn't enough, so with my father's coaching I followed in his footsteps and became a door-to-door salesman. First I invested my savings in a sample kit of greeting cards, gift wrapping, and personalized stationery. I did all right in that line, but in 1951 and 1952 I did much better selling Roll-It knife sharpeners (only \$1.00, and it will never wear out) and MagnaPad magnetic potholders. which I was able to exhibit without even being invited into the kitchen by hanging the potholder right on the screen door. After every housewife in Fairmont had been amazed

by my MagnaPads, I traveled all over southwestern Minnesota with my father, during summer vacations, selling my kitchen novelties, while he sold the new product in his life, Encyclopedia Britannica funior.

My career as a door-to-door salesman ended in 1953, not just because my family left Fairmont that year but because I'd stopped being a cute little kid who could charm bored housewives and had become a pimply and not so charming teenager already close to six feet tall at age 13. But a part of me has always remained a salesman. The only job I had after college that I really liked and showed any talent for was working as an advertising copywriter at Doyle Dane Bernbach, I wrote ads for cars and suitcases and vodka and electric organs.

Even now as a freelance writer a certain amount of my work involves salesmanship of a sort, for I have to be able to convince a book publisher that a book that he hasn't read and that I haven't written vet is going to be such a good book that he should pay me to write it. That system doesn't work for every book. Sometimes I have to actually write a book before I can sell it. That was the case with The Brave Little Toaster. In fact, even after it was written and published in a science-fiction magazine, and had won several awards in the science-fiction field, and was being made into a feature-length cartoon, even then one children's book publisher after another turned it down. Finally I got an editor to explain why. She didn't think it was a proper children's book, because (1) it was too well written, so much so that she had enjoyed reading it herself, and (2) children wouldn't accept the basic premise that appliances can do things by themselves and talk to each other. Mice, okay. Rabbits, okay. Even dolls, okay. But not toasters and not radios even though most radios are notorious chatterboxes.

I don't think I have to argue with that editor's reason (2), since it is now a pretty well established fact that the appliances who wash our dishes and vacuum our rugs and toast slices of bread for us are just as capable of having feelings and hav-

ing fun as mice and rabbits and dolls. But her reason (1) is still a major aggravation for me, since I refuse to believe that a writer has to write in a special, slightly brain-damaged way when he writes for children, always taking care to keep sentences uncomplicated and not to use long words and to avoid writing anything a grown-up could also enjoy. These rules applied (the editor explained to me) especially to fantasies like The Brave Little Toaster, because fantasy is for very young children, five- or six-year-olds, while older children, who'd be capable of reading my book, would have outgrown fantasy and they would want to read realistic stories about the kind of problems adolescents face in the real world, like drug abuse and prejudice and poverty. Now, those are real problems, and a good storyteller will know how to write good stories about such matters, but it simply isn't true that kids stop enjoying fantasy as soon as they start having acne problems.

This kid certainly didn't. In fact, it was just at the point that I began to worry about pimples that I discovered science fiction, and my fantasy life took off. Actually, it was my best friend, Bruce Burton, who discovered SF for me. I knew Bruce from my Star and Tribune paper route days. We shared a passion for the same kind of movies (horror movies especially) and comic books-especially the controversial comics published by EC, The Vault of Horror and The Crypt of Terror, which were forbidden to me but which Bruce had a complete run of. Our favorite pastime was Story Tag, in which we took turns spinning out stories modeled on our favorite Saturday afternoon cliffhanger serials. One of us would take our hero to the very brink of some seemingly inescapable mortal danger and then leave it for the other to figure out a way to rescue him and continue his story.

At some point in 1951 Bruce's

Story Tag contributions took a quantum leap ahead of mine. He began to come up with ideas that were astounding: there was no other word for it. In fact, Bruce had, unknown to me, discovered the leading SF magazine of the day, Astounding Science Fiction, and was freely adapting its contents for Story Tag, I wasn't up against just Bruce Burton but the combined imaginative resources of Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt, Robert Heinlein, et cetera. After Bruce had let me suppose for a few months that he was the country's most amazing eleven-year-old genius, he explained where all his great ideas were coming from, and I began subscribing to Astounding myself.

A subscription was necessary, because science fiction wasn't easy to get hold of in the early 1950's, not in our corner of Minnesota. There was none at the public library, and the drug store where I bought comic books didn't stock SF magazines and had only a few SF paperbacks, which sold for 25 or 35 cents. I read and reread the first paperback editions of Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End. Alfred Bester's The Demolished Man. George Orwell's 1984, plus terrific serials in Astounding by Isaac Asimov and Hal Clement. Asimov's serial, The Caves of Steel, got me to writing, in direct imitation, my own first work of science fiction. I've long since lost the nickel tablet in which I wrote down the cast of characters and began to lay out the plot, and I've forgotten everything else about it, including its title-but it wasn't wasted effort, was it? For the mental muscles I began to exercise in that tablet are still busy with the same work forty years later. . .

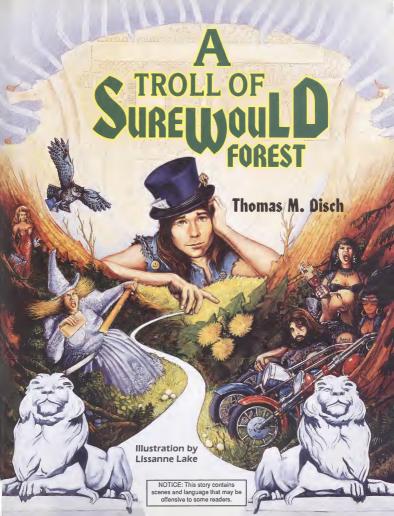
. . . And some thirty years since I sold my first SF story, in 1962, to Cele Goldsmith, the editor of Fantastic and of Amazing Stories, in which magazines my stories began appearing with some regularity from then on. She was my most faithful editor,

and it was her taste that steered me in the direction(s) I would take in my first years, both by what she accepted and by what she rejected. Now I can bless her for discouraging me from continuing with a novel, A Game of Armageddon, that it would have been a waste of time to go on

Of the stories she did take, probably the best, and surely the most often reprinted, was "Descending," but my own personal favorite was a little ieu d'esprit called "Dangerous Flags." There was an embryonic zaniness, a bounce and blitheness, inthat tale that I would have to wait for over twenty years to bring to its mature growth in what is the personal favorite among my novels. A Troll of Surewould Forest.

My critics, those who admire my work as much as those who have railed against it, tend to think of me as a dark, brooding, gloomy sort, and I've got to allow as how a story like "Descending" isn't notable for its cheerfulness and zip. But there are wide expanses of the Dischian character where the sun never sets. and where fun and games are a way of life, and that is the particular territory inhabited by A Troll. I've never had so much sheer fun writing any other novel. In some ways it is more like The Brave Little Toaster than it is like my novels for grown-ups. It has the simplicity and bright, cartoonish colors of a children's book, as well as a tone of patient (if slightly gonzo) instruction that even most children's book editors consider a major tabu. It is populated by all the stock characters of sword and sorcery that I've always vowed to have nothing to do with. There's even, god help me, a dragon! (In the second installment.) It is silly, it is ribald (there is, be warned, a lot of Rough Talk), it is not a bit like Real Life, but I swear it is, at the same time, as much a Work of Literature as my darkest dystopia.

To be concluded



T bis novel is dedicated to the Reading Impaired in the Reading Impaired in the bope that it will bring them many bours of pleasure and instruction as they begin their first journey on the Reading Realiroad.
Toot! Toot!
All aboard for Survewould Forest!

Chapter One

A World Where People Sing

Joe Doe was an average kind of guy who lived in Innacity, which is a city a lot like the city you live in, only it's in the future. Joe had a job delivering pizzas to people who ordered them from Pizza Bill's. It was a good Job, and it paid him a million dollars a week. To you and me that sounds like a lot of money, but in the future, because of inflation, it was worth about what a hundred dollars is worth today. But Joe didn't think about inflation. He was happy doing his job and earning a million dollars a week, although in another way he wasn't really happy at all. He wanted his life to be more important than it was. He wanted friends who would like him. He wanted to belong to something bigger than he was. Maybe sometimes you've felt like that too. I sure know that I have.

Anyhow, one day in the fall of the year 2992, a thousand years from now, Joe Doe got off work early and decided that just for a change he would do something different, only he didn't know what.

"I'm in a rut," he told his boss, Pizza Bill. "What do you think I should do?"

Pizza Bill looked down at the round ball of pizza dough on the wooden counter and thought. "I don't know, Joe. Sometimes when I've been down in the dumps, I take off for a day and go to Surewould Forest."

"Surewould Forest," Joe repeated. "I've heard of Surewould Forest, but I've never been there. What's it like?"

"There's no way I can explain it to you, Joe," said Pizza Bill. "You'll have to go there and experience it yourself. Here, let me write down the address."

Pizza Bill took out the pad of paper on which he wrote the addresses of the customers Joe delivered pizzas to. Then he licked the tip of his pencil and wrote down the address of Surewould Forest.

"Thanks for your advice, Bill," said Joe, as he folded up the slip of paper and put it in the band of his stovepipe hat. "I'll go there right now."

As soon as Joe was outside the pizza parlor, he took the slip of paper out of his hatband and looked at it. To Joe, Pizza Bill's handwriting looked like little bits of mozzarella cheese sprinkled on top of a pizza before it goes in the oven. That was because Joe couldn't read. He was an illiterate. He had gone to school like everyone else, and he even had a diploma, but he was an illiterate anyhow, and it made him feel very ashamed.

Joe wasn't dumb. He would have learned how to read if he'd ever had a teacher who'd known how to teach him, but he never did, and now it was too late. It wasn't Joe's fault that he couldn't read, but other people wouldn't know that, and so he kept his illiteracy a secret. Even Pizza Bill, who saw Joe almost every day, didn't know Joe's secret. When he wrote the addresses of pizza customers on slips of paper, he never guessed that Joe had to ask strangers on the street what the writing said.

That's what Joe did now. He went across the street to the newsstand and waited till a dork came along and bought an issue of *Dorks Today*, which was a popular magazine for dorks. Then Joe went up to the dork and said, "Pardon me, sir, but could you tell me how to get to this address?"

The dork looked at the slip of paper, then turned it around upside down and looked again. "Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street," said the dork. "Why, that's the address of Surewould Forest. Gosh, you've got a long way to go. How do you mean to get there? On the bus or on the "fcl"r-powered bullet train?"

"I thought I'd jog," said Joe. "I'm wearing my jogging shoes and my jogging shorts. Do you think it's too far to jog?"

"From Two Hundred Fifty-Second Street!" exclaimed the dork. Then he laughed in a jolly sort of way: "Ho, ho, ho. It might not be too far for you, but it sure would be for me."

Like most dorks, this dork was very overweight. He laughed about it, but being overweight is no laughing matter. It can lead to heart attacks, and it makes it hard for the lungs to do their work breathing. The best way to avoid being overweight is to get plenty of exercise every day, like Joe, and to watch what you eat.

"Which way should I go?" asked Joe.

"Why, downtown, of course," said the dork, pointing downtown.

"Thanks," said Joe politely. Then he pulled his hat down firmly and started jogging downtown.

Within just a few minutes Joe had jogged twenty-one blocks and was feeling real good. He was in a new neighborhood now, a neighborhood he didn't know and where no one knew him. The buildings were higher, and people seemed better dressed, especially the dorks and the elves. There were dorks in safari suits with sun helmets, and other dorks in funny tee-shirts, though since Joe couldn't read the writing on the teeshirts, he didn't always know why they were funny. The elves were all wearing white collars, as elves generally a do, but some of their collars were extremely large. Some of the elves wore Sony antennas, and others, the ones without antennas, read books as they walked along the sidewalk. There were also a few fairies, but only of the poorer sort. They wore baseball caps and bowling shirts and ballet tights with pictures of people kissing.

It was a beautiful, bright, sunny day, and everyone there on the street looked just as happy as Joe. Some were laughing, and some were singing, and some were dancing to the music on their headphones, and almost everyone had a smile on his or her face. In many ways living in the future was like living inside a musical comedy like The Sound of Musics or Annie, where people can sing and dance whenever they feel like it. For instance, on the other side of the street from Joe was a group of dorks on their way to Innacity Stadium to see a ballgame between the Superstars and the Favorites. Instead of just walking to the stadium, these dorks were holding onto each other in a kind of conga line and kicking out their legs and singing.

This is the song the dorks were singing:

Song of the Dorks

Ho-ho, Huff-huff,
We're seven heavy dorks,
And when we're feeling gruff,
We pop some corks
And show our stuff
To dorks who ain't as tough.

Tra-la, Tra-lee, We rather like to lark, So when we're on a spree We buy some Buds And bake some spuds And revel after dark.

For a while, while they were all close together, Joe sang along with the dorks, even though he didn't consider himself a dork, even potentially. But dorks like to have fun, the same as anyone else, and it was a catchy tune, and Joe had a pretty good voice, so why not? But then, since he was jogging and they were dancing, he got so far ahead of them that he was singing the song more or less all on his own, so he stopped singing and concentrated on his stride.

Chapter Two

Inside Surewould Forest

Joe jogged and jogged and jogged until at last he got to the corner of 42nd Street and 5th Avenue, where there was a big park with trees and grass and even a brook back behind the branches. From a distance you could see that the park only stretched as far as 6th Avenue to the west and to 40th Street in the downtown direction. but when you got closer it seemed that the city just stopped and there was nothing but forest ahead of you. The trees were so high and grew so close together that none of the buildings on the other side of the park were visible. Maybe the reason for this had something to do with the special fence of nonreflecting glass that went all around the park that Ioe discovered by walking right smack into it. Fortunately he had stopped jogging at that point and did not sustain any serious injuries. Joe followed the glass fence until he came to the tick-

et booth, which was beside a statue of a sleepy-looking lion.

"Hi there," said Joe to the elf inside the ticket booth. "What does it cost to go into Surewould Forest?"

The elf yawned and put aside the book he'd been reading and tightened his white collar a notch tighter. "It depends," said the elf, "on whether you want a season pass or a single admission. It also depends on your bonding status. Are you a dork or a troll or what? I can tell at a glance that you're no elf."

"I'm not anything really," said Joe. When he saw the elf frown, he added, "I mean, not yet. I've only just turned twenty-one. Do I have to be bonded to get in? No one told me that."

"Not necessarily," said the elf. "But if you aren't bonded, this is the wrong window. You should be over there." He pointed to where there was another ticket booth beside the statue of another sleepy lion. "That's for admissions to the orientation session. Next time read the sign, why don't you? Turkey,"

Joe blushed at the elf's rudeness, but the elf had already loosened his collar and stuck his long beak of a nose back inside his book, so there was no point protesting. Joe met a lot of rude people in the course of a day's work delivering pizzas, and if he'd taken offense every time he'd have to spend his whole life feeling angry at the world, and that wouldn't improve anything. We'd probably all be a lot better off if we followed Joe's example in this case and didn't let ourself get fired up about every little thing that happens. Don't you agree?

Joe walked across the bustling plaza, where vendors were selling tee-shirts and other souvenirs, and handed his card to the person in the booth, who was not an elf but a lady fairy. "One single admission to the orientation session, please," he said, using the terms that the elf had used. Very often people who are illiterate like Joe are very good at remembering what people say to them, because they have to be. If for no other reason.

The lady fairy stuck Joe's card into the credit slot.

There was a low chuffing sound and then a bing.

"I'm sorry, but your credit balance is insufficient," said the lady fairy in a singsongy voice like the Operator on the phone who tells you that the number you've called doesn't exist. "Do you want your future wages garnished?"

Joe almost said yes without thinking. But then he thought and asked, "That depends on what it costs. How much is the cheapest ticket?"

The lady fairy raised her eyebrow, which was just a thin black line on her face in the place where a real eyebrow would ordinarily be. Joe was sure she was going to tell him to read the sign and call him a turkey, in which case he thought he would just head back uptown on the bullet train and forget all about Surewould Forest, but instead she smilled a funnly little smile that crinkled just the left half-inch corner of her lips and said, "It's two hundred fifty thousand dollars for a matinee admission. In another fifteen minutes it will go up to three hundred seventy-five thousand dollars. You've got good timing."

Joe might not be able to read, but he was okay with numbers. He figured that two hundred fifty thousand dollars was five times as much as a movie would cost, but not so much that he couldn't fit it into his budget in three or four weeks' time. So he agreed to let United Avatar, the corporation that ran Surewould Forest, attach his wages, and the machine inside the ticket booth went chunk, and the lady fairy handed him back his card.

"Just go through that turnstile," she instructed him, "and wait for a minute or two in the transit chamber. Then a door will slide open and you can go into the forest. You may feel a little dizzy at first—it's the shock of all that fresh air. After that, just follow the path to the signpost. What you do then is all up to you. Here's the pin for your hat." She handed him an entertainment pin about the size of a roofing nail, the head of which was embossed to look like the face of the sleepy lion that stood guard above the booth.

"And here is your survival pack." She handed him a plastic carrier, which also bore the emblem of the sleepy lion. "Have a good time, and remember—the forest closes at midnight. As soon as the warning bell starts tolling, you should head to the nearest exit."

After he had left the window, Joe stuck the entertainment pin through the crown of his hat and looked inside the survival pack. It contained complimentary packages of Smoke, Coke, and Cream of Wheat. For two hundred fifty thousand dollars it didn't seem like much of a bargain.

Joe went through the turnstile and waited impatiently in the transit chamber. A concealed sound system announced that the Ambrosian Chorus would sing the Surewould Forest Themesong, and then they did:

O come to the oaks and the pines, Come to the lakes and the mines. Come to the feast, Both Beauty and Beast, And drink our delectable wines.

Put on your robe and your crown.
White up your face like a clown.
Open your hand
At the witch's command,
And sleep on her pallet of down.

A door slid open, and Joe stepped into a shimmering brightness. All at once it was as though the city didn't exist, for on the inside the glass fence worked like a mirror, and all you could see in any direction were the thick trunks of the trees and yellow dapples of sunlight running about through the long, unclipped grass and, looking up, millions and feature.

"Welcome," said a voice so quiet Joe knew it had to be on the headphones in his head, "to the wonderful world of Surewould Forest, Please observe the following few and simple rules. Do not pick the flowers or mushrooms unless invited to do so. Say on the designated , pathways. Return your entertainment pins at the exits in the receptacles marked for that purpose. Now close your eyes, take a deep breath of that beautiful country air—and don't be surprised at anything that happens. For all the staff of United Avatars, let me wish you a pleasant and fulfilling queer.

Chapter Three

The Words in the Heart

The lady fairy had told Joe to follow the path to the signpost, and that is what he did. But once he got there, the signpost was no help, of course, since he couldn't read the signs. There were four signs, and each one pointed a different direction down a different path.

"Eenee, meenee, meinee, mo," Joe recited, using the same counting-out formula he'd been taught in day care. "Hammed caught me by my toe. When I squealed he let me go. Eenee, meenee, meinee, mo." Mo was the second path from the left, the path that seemed to head most directly into the forest's depths.

He had not gone many steps along the path to mo before a voice said, "Stop right there." There was no one ahead of him along the path, and no one behind him by the signpost, and no one seemed to be lurking in the trees on either side of him, so he decided that the voice must be coming from his headphones, like the voice that had welcomed him to the forest.

"Why don't you look up, dum-dum?" the voice suggested.

Joe looked up, and there on the branch of a tree right over his head was an owl wearing a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a small blue book in his right claw.

glasses and carrying a small blue book in his right claw. Joe must have looked very taken aback, for the owl gave a great hoot of laughter. Then it ruffled its feathers and recited the following poem:

> To-whit, to-whoo! All literary elves Who read about themselves Know what to do By looking through The books upon their shelves. To-whit, to-whoo!

Finishing the poem, the owl let go of the small blue book, and Joe caught it before it hit the grass.

Since the owl could talk, Joe decided to ask it which of the four paths he was on—and, if it knew, which was the right one for him to take. For he had an uneasy feeling, now, that the counting-out had gone wrong and mowas the wrong choice.

"Pardon me," said Joe, "but I wonder if you could tell me..."

"It's all in the book," said the owl.

"I wonder if you could tell me—" he began again, in a louder voice.

"A word to the wise is sufficient," the owl interrupted again, also in a louder voice.

"—which path I should be on?"

"Look at the signpost, dum-dum, and take the path that leads to the kind of person you want to be. If you want to be a dork, take the path that goes to the Dorkery. But if you want to be an elf, as I assume you do, since that's the path you're on, then stay on it and you'll be at the elves' bookshop soon enough." "I wouldn't have much fun at a bookshop," Joe said woefully. "You see, I can't read."

"Can't read!" exclaimed the owl. It almost seemed to be knocked off the branch of the tree by surprise. "What do you mean, you can't read? Everyone can read. Mice read. Squirrels read. Even robins can read, and robins are about as dumb as they come. How could you get through the long summer days without being able to read? Not read? I'ven ever heard anything so ridiculous?"

"It's not very nice of you to make fun of me," said

Joe, "just because I have a handicap."

"Owls aren't particularly nice," said the owl. "Though I can offer you some potato chips, if you like. I've got plain, barbecue flavor, and onion-and-garlic. There's also some Pringles, but I think they may have gone stale. No one seems to ask for Pringles any more." "Barbecue flavor would be nice." said loe.

sarbecue navor would be nice, said joe.

The owl clawed his way across the branch to where there was a hole in the trunk of the tree. He dipped his head into the hole and took out a bag of barbecue flavor potato chips. He dropped the bag to Joe.

"That will be ten thousand dollars, please," said the owl.

It was too late to return the potato chips. He had already torn open the bag. Reluctantly Joe took out his credit card and handed it up to the owl, who took it over to the same hole in the tree trunk. There was a ding, and then a chunk, and the owl returned Joe's credit card.

"Now," said the owl, "how would you like me to teach you to read?"

"What do you charge for that?" Joe asked sullenly.
"Not a thing, for your first lesson. If you're clever,

vou may not need another."

"I've tried before," said Joe.
"Obviously," said the owl, "you didn't try hard enough.
Now, do you want to learn to read or not? Make up

your mind. I don't have all day."
"Okay." said Joe. "Teach me, just try."

"Do you see," said the owl, pointing with one of its wings, "on the trunk of this tree, where a heart has been carved into the bark? Inside that heart are three words, one below the other. Do you see them?"

"Yes," said Joe, a little grudgingly, for he didn't think he should be taught to read from what looked like a

woodland version of graffiti.

"Now, every word in the world is made up of letters. In the entire alphabet there are only twenty-five letters, In ancient times there were twenty-six, but that was incompatible with the decimal system, so the World Spelling Council eliminated X. I hope you don't mind a little philology from time to time. I think it lends a certain spice."

"What's philology?" asked Joe.

The owl sighed. "Never mind. We'll just concentrate on the letters of the words in the heart for now. As you can see, the top word has three letters, the middle word has five, and the bottom word has four. Are you with me so fat?"

Joe nodded, but in fact he was beginning to feel a lit-

tle sick, remembering his days in P.S. 1,372 and how he would always get to feeling woozy and peculiar when his teachers tried to make him learn anything that tasted, mentally, like peas or rutabagas or stewed prunes.

"Now, you have to think of each letter as a different kind of animal or bird that leaves a different shape of footprint in the snow and makes a different kind of sound. Take the word 'owl' as an example. 'Owl' begins with the loveliest of all the letters, O, a simple, self-sufficient shape—the shape, it has always seemed to me, of an owl asleep. The letter O sounds like itself when it's alone, and like this when there are two side by side: Whoo! Whoo! Whoo! Of course, in other situations or with other letters, it can make other sounds too, but they are all more or less O-like. Birds have the same capacity as letters to vary their song, within limits. Now, do you see the O just to the left of the middle letter in the middle word?"

Joe nodded.

"If you take the O out of that word, the letters that are left will spell 'elves,' though you must also add ancother E. Fis, you see, when they are not squealing their own name, are often silent. I think it interesting to note, further, that if you add a thrid E to 'elves', the result is 'eleves,' which is what the word 'elves' originally came from, as I understand it, when it was French. That must be why elves are such studious creatures. However, I forget that you have no interest in philology. Well—there you have it."

"Is that all?" Joe asked.

"Time flies, my boy, Already I hear the mice stiring in their cozy burrows. What I've told you is enough for you to read the four signs on the signpost without help or hints. There is a sign for each of the four kinds of people in Innacity, and all the letters on the signpost are also here in the heart. So when you've learned to read the signpost, you'll be able to come back here and read the message in the heart. If you do, something strange will happen—that's a promise."

With not another word the owl flew off into the forest, and Joe returned to the signpost and considered the four words there with a feeling not of wooziness or even bewilderment but of grim curiosity, determined, if he could not read the signpost, to tear it down and make a bonfire of it.

It wasn't all that easy, or all that quick either, but at last Joe had figured out what all four signs meant, and the danger of a forest fire was averted.

As the owl had explained at the start, the sign ELVES meant elves. Since the owl had said that E's could be silent, and E was the first letter in ELVES, it seemed a safe bet that the second letter, L, had to be making the Illl sound, and that meant that trolls, who also had that sound in their name, were indicated by the sign TROLLS.

At that point Joe almost decided to call it a day and head down the path the TROLIS sign pointed to, but having solved this much of the puzzle he didn't want to stop. For which I've got to say, "Good for Joe!" More people should be like that—ready to see a job through to the end. It's people like that—beople with gumption

and stick-to-itiveness—who are slotted for success and big money. Remember that when *you* feel faint-hearted or simply lazy.

Surprisingly, the puzzle got easier the more Joe worked at it. If TROLIS meant trolls, then its second letter, R, must be the letter that made the growling sound, and so the sign DORSS, which had the O the owl talked about, followed by an R, had to mean dorks, and that meant that the sign that was left, FAIRIES, had to mean fairles, since fairles were the fourth major group of people in the world of the future.

With this much figured out, Joe returned to the tree with the heart carved into its bark, where he tried putting together the sounds he'd learned from the sign-post into new combinations, according to the three words in the heart.

The middle one was easy. It had to sound like "elves" but with an O in it. Could it be "loaves," like loaves of bread? Or would the O sound more like the O in owl? If so, then it might be

LOVES!

Joe was sure that was what it meant, and if it did, then the other two words would probably be people's names. What names? The top word had the first letter and fourth letter from DORKS, only turned around backward. In between them was the letter that happened twice in the middle of PAIRIES and didn't seem to have any sound in particular so far as Joe could figure. After experimenting with various possibilities—could, cud, cad, cowed—none of which sounded like a person's name, Joe decided it was probably Kid, since Kid was sometimes a person's nickname.

KID LOVE

The last word came to Joe in a flash, without his having to really figure it out—and he laughed out loud. Because the last word, which also was probably some poor schmuck's nickname, had to be . . .

Still laughing, he said the word out loud, since when a joke is really funny, you like to share it, even if there's no one there. But when Joe said the word, there was a sudden flash of lightning, splitting the tree in two. There right in front of him, wearing a gigantic white dress and a huge white pointy hat and holding a gigantic bar of soap in one hand and a long golden ruler in the other, was the fattest, meanest-looking witch that Joe had ever seen.

Chapter Four

Under the Witch's Skirt

"I," said the witch, in a voice that was both squeaky and very loud, like the voice of a very old soprano in a very difficult opera, "am Alecto, the Witch of Decency, and you, young man, have offended me dreadfully!"

"I'm sorry," said Joe, who always tried to be polite, even to witches. "I didn't mean to."

"He didn't mean to!" shrieked Alecto. "He uses language that I, an experienced witch and the chairperson

of W.A.R.T., would not sully myself to repeat, even in a court of *Law*, and then he has the impudence, the efforntery, the unmitigated gall to tell me that he didn't *mean* to! Open your mouth, young man."

"What?"

"You're not deaf, are you? I said open your mouth. I am going to wash out your mouth with soap."

"Hey, listen, I said I'm sorry."

"And you'll be a lot sorrier after you've had a mouthful of Fels-Naphtha soap, believe me. Now sit down and take your punishment like a man. Don't you know you should always sit when a witch talks to you?"

Some people don't know they're angry at all until they get really screaming angry, loe was like that. He was getting angry, but he didn't know it yet. So instead of telling the wich to go to hell, or saying something even ruder, as you or I might have done, he continued to try to be reasonable. "There's no rule that says I have to do any of that," he said reasonably. "I mean, I'm a paying customer. I came to Surewould Forest for fun, not for punishment."

The witch rolled up her eyes and screamed with laughter. Then she stopped cold and stared at Joe as though he were a piece of lumber and looks were nails. Then her face changed again, and she smilled a smile that said as plain as day that she meant to play a trick on him.

"Well, well, well—so you're a paying customer," said Alecto. "That must mean you have a responsible position in society. Perhaps I've misjudged you."

"Responsible" Joe mumbled, looking down at the laces of his jogging shoes, which were tied in an especially complicated pattern known only to pizza delivery boys. He felt peculiar. Though he had never before been made to feel ashamed of working for Pizza Bill, there was something in Alecto's way of talking that made him unwilling to tell her what his job was. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"I can say whatever I want," said Alecto. "But other people can only say what I let them say. That, in a nutshell, is the meaning of freedom."

"Sounds more like censorship to me," said Joe.
"Freedom and censorship are just two sides of

Freedom and censorship are just two sides of the same coin—the coin of my authority. And how, you may ask, do I come to possess such authority? Through this? She held up the golden ruler in front of her as. It hough it were a sword whose blade she meant to test. "It is by virtue of the authority vested in me by this ruler that I, and I alone, make up the rules that govern Surewould Forest. Needless to say, the purpose of all my rules is to make Surewould Forest a safer, deaner, more comfortable, and nicer environment for everyone, and particularly for me, on the trickle-down theory that what is good for me will ultimately benefit everyone."

The more the witch began to sound like an announcer on the Nightly News, the more restless Joe became. He never watched the news if he could help it.

"Consider," Alecto went on, "the rule you've just broken, the rule against Rude Talk. What if an innocent

alk. What if an innocent

Descending

First published in the July 1964 issue of Fantastic Stories

Thomas M. Disch

Catsup, mustard, pickle relish, mayonnaise, two kinds of salad dressing, bacon grease, and a lemon. Oh, yes, two trays of ice cubes. In the cupboard it wasn't much better: jars and boxes of spice, flour, sugar, salt—and a box of raisins!

An empty box of raisins.

Not even any coffee. Not even tea, which he hated. Nothing in the mail but a bill from Underwood's: Unless we receive the arrears on your account...

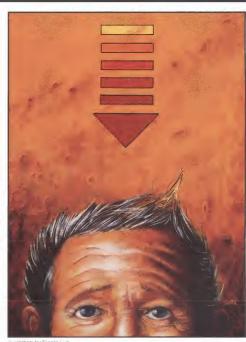
Four dollars and seventy-five cents in change jingled in his coat pocket—the plunder of the chiamis bottle he had promised himself never to break open. He was sparred the unpleasant-ness of having to sell his books. They had all been sold. The letter to Graham had gone out a week ago. If his brother intended to send something this time, it would have come by now.

—I should be de-sperate, he

—I should be desperate, I thought. —Perhaps I am.

He might have looked in the Times. But, no, that was too depressing—applying for jobs at \$50 a week and being turned down. Not that he blamed them; he wouldn't have hired himself, himself. He had been a grasshopper for years. The ants were on to his tricks.

He shaved without soap and brushed his shoes to a high polish. He whitened the sepulchre of his unwashed torso with a



Iuntration by Nicola Cult

fresh, starched shirt and chose his somberest tie from the rack. He began to feel excited and expressed it, characteristically, by appearing statuesquely, icily calm.

Descending the stairway to the first floor, he encountered Mrs. Beale, who was pretending to sweep the well-swept floor of the entrance.

"Good afternoon—or I s'pose it's good morning for you, eh?"

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Beale."

"Your letter come?"

"Not yet."

"The first of the month isn't far off."

"Yes indeed, Mrs. Beale."

At the subway station he considered a moment before answering the attendant: one token or two? Two, he decided. After all, he had no choice but to return to his apartment. The first of the month was still a long way off.

—If Jean Valjean had had a charge account, he would have never gone to prison.

Having thus cheered himself, he settled down to enjoy the ads in the subway car. Smoke. Try. Eat. Give. See. Drink. Use. Buy. He thought of Alice with her mushrooms: Eat me.

At 34th Street he got off and entered Underwood's Department Store directly from the train platform. On the main floor he stopped at the cigar stand and bought a carton of cigarettes.

"Cash or charge?"

"Charge." He handed the clerk the laminated plastic card. The charge was rung up.

Fancy Groceries was on 5. He made his selections judiciously. A jar of instant and a two-pound can of drip ground coffee, a large tin of corned beef, packaged soups and boxes of pancake mix and condensed milk. Jam, peanut butter, and honey. Six cans of truan fish. Then, he indulged himself in perishables: English cookies, an Edam cheese, a small frozen pheasant—even fruitcake. He never ate so well as when he was broke. He couldn't afford to.

"Fourteen eighty-seven."

This time after ringing up his charge, the clerk checked the number on his card against her list of closed or doubtful accounts. She smiled apologetically and handed the card back.

"Sorry, but we have to check."

"I understand."

The bag of groceries weighed a good twenty pounds. Carrying it with the exquisite casualness of a burglar passing before a policeman with his loot, he took the escalator to the bookshop on 8. His choice of books was determined by the same principle as his choice of groceries. First, the staples: two Victorian novels he had never read, Vantiy Fair and Middlemarch; the Sayers' translation of Dante; and a two-volume anthology of German plays, none of which he had read and few he had even heard of. Then the perhishables: a sensational novel that had reached the best seller list via the Supreme Court, and two mysteries.

He had begun to feel giddy with self-indulgence. He reached into his jacket pocket for a coin.

-Heads a new suit, tails the Sky Room.

The Sky Room on 15 was empty of all but a few women chatting over coffee and cakes. He was able to get a seat by a window. He ordered from the a la carte side of the menu and finished his meal with espresso and baklava. He handed the waitress his credit card and tipped her fifty cents.

Dawdling over his second cup of coffee, he began Vanity Fair. Rather to his surprise, he found himself enjoying it. The waitress returned with his card and a receipt for the meal.

Since the Sky Room was on the top floor of Underwood's, there was only one escalator to take now—Descending, Riding down, he continued to read Vanity Fair. He could read anywhere—in restaurants, on subways, even walking down the street. At each landing he made his way from the foot of one escalator to the head of the next without lifting his eyes from the book. When he came to the Bargain Basement, he would be only a few steps from the subway turnstile. He was halfway through Chapter VI (on page 55, to

be exact) when he began to feel something amiss.

—How long does this damn thing take to reach the

basement?

He stopped at the next landing, but there was no sign to indicate on what floor he was nor any door by which he might reenter the store. Deducing that he was between floors, he took the escalator down one more flight only to find the same perplexing absence of landmarks.

There was, however, a water fountain, and he stooped to take a drink.

—I must have gone to a sub-basement. But this was not too likely after all. Escalators were seldom provided for janitors and stockboys.

He waited on the landing, watching the steps of the escalator descend toward him and, at the end of their journey, telescope in upon themselves and disappear. He waited a long while, and no one else came down the moving steps.

—Perhaps the store has closed. Having no wristwatch and having rather lost track of the time, he had no way of knowing. At last, he reasoned that he had become so engrossed in the Thackeray novel that he had simply stopped on one of the upper landings—say, on 8—to finish a chapter and had read on to page 55 without re.^t alizing that he was making no progress on the escalators.

When he read, he could forget everything else.

He must, therefore, still be somewhere above the main floor. The absence of exits, though disconcerting, could be explained by some quirk in the floor plan. The absence of signs was merely a carelessness on the part of the management.

He tucked Vanity Fair into his bag and stepped onto the grilled lip of the escalator—not, it must be admitted, without a certain degree of reluctance. At each landing, he marked his progress by a number spoken aloud. By eight he was uneasy; by fifteen he was desperate.

eight he was uneasy; by fifteen he was desperate.

It was, of course, possible that he had to descend two

flights of stairs for every floor of the store. With this possibility in mind, he counted off fifteen more landings.

—No.

Dazedly and as though to deny the reality of this seemingly interminable stairwell, he continued his descent. When he stopped again at the forty-fifth landing, he was trembling. He was afraid.

He rested the shopping bag on the bare concrete floor of the landing, realizing that his am had gone quite sore from supporting the twenty pounds and more of groceries and books. He discounted the enticing possibility that "it was all a dream," for the dream-word is the reality of the dreamer, to which he could not weakly surrender, no more than he could surrender to the realities of life. Besides, he was not dreaming; of that he was quite sure.

He checked his pulse. It was fast—say, eighty a minute. He rode down two more flights, counting his pulse. Eighty almost exactly. Two flights took only one minute.

He could read about one page a minute, a little less on an escalator. Suppose he had spent one hour on the escalators while he had read: sixty minutes—one hundred and twenty floors. Plus forty-seven that he had counted. One hundred sixty-seven. The Sky Room was on 15.

167 - 15 = 152.

He was in the one-hundred-fifty-second sub-basement. That was impossible.

The appropriate response to an impossible situation was to deal with it as though it were commonplace—like Alice in Wonderland. Ergo, he would return to Underwood's the same way he had (apparently) left it. He would walk up one hundred fifty-two flights of downgoing escalators. Taking the steps three at a time and running, it was almost like going up a regular staircase. But after ascending the second escalator in this manner, he found himself already out of breath.

There was no hurry. He would not allow himself to be overtaken by panic.

No

He picked up the bag of groceries and books he had left on that landing, waiting for his breath to return, and darted up a third and fourth flight. While he rested on the landing, he tried to count the steps between floors, but his count differed depending on whether he counted with the current or against it, down or up. The average was roughly eighteen steps, and the steps appeared to be eight or nine inches deep. Each flight was, therefore, about twelve feet.

It was one-third of a mile, as the plumb drops, to Underwood's main floor.

As he dashed up the ninth escalator, the bag of groceries broke open at the bottom, where the thawing pheasant had dampened the paper. Groceries and books tumbled onto the steps, some rolling of their own accord to the landing below, others being transported there by the moving stairs and forming a neat little pile. Only the jum jar had been broken.

He stacked the groceries in the corner of the landing, except for the half-thawed pheasant, which he stuffed into his coat pocket, anticipating that his ascent would take him well past his dinner hour.

Physical exertion had dulled his finer feelings—to be precise, his capacity for fear. Like a cross-country runner in his last laps, he thought single-mindedly of the task at hand and made no effort to understand what he had in any case already decided was not to be understood. He mounted one flight, rested, mounted and rested again. Each mount was more wearisome; each rest longer. He stopped counting the landings after the twenty-eighth, and some time after hat—how long he had no idea—his legs gave out and he collapsed to the concrete floor of the landing. His calves were hard aching knots of muscle; his thighs quivered erratically. He tried to do knee-bends and fell backwards.

Despite his recent dinner (assuming that it had been recent), he was hungry and he devoured the entire pheasant, completely thawed now, without being able to tell if it were raw or had been pre-cooked.

—This is what it's like to be a cannibal, he thought as he fell asleep.

Sleeping, he dreamt he was falling down a bottomless pit. Waking, he discovered nothing had changed, except the dull ache in his legs, which had become a sharp pain. Overhead, a single strip of fluorescent lighting snaked

down the stairwell. The mechanical purr of the escalators seemed to have heightened to the roar of a Niagara, and their rate of descent seemed to have increased proportionately.

Fever, he decided. He stood up stiffly and flexed some of the soreness from his muscles.

Halfway up the third escalator, his legs gave way under him. He attempted the climb again and succeeded. He collapsed again on the next flight. Lying on the landing where the escalator had deposited him, he realized that his hunger had returned. He also needed to have water—and to let it.

The latter necessity he could easily—and without false modesty—satisfy. Also he remembered the water fountain he had drunk from yesterday, and he found another three floors below.

—It's so much easier going down.

His groceries were down there. To go after them now, he would enase whatever progress he had made in his ascent. Perhaps Underwood's main floor was only a few more flights up. Or a hundred. There was no way to know. Because he was hungry and because he was tired

and because the futility of mounting endless flights of descending escalators was, as he now considered it, a labor of Sisyphus, he returned, descended, gave in.

At first he allowed the escalator to take him along at its own mild pace, but he soon grew impatient of this. He found that the exercise of running down the steps three at a time was not so exhausting as running up. It was refreshing, almost. And, by swimming with the current instead of against it, his progress, if such it can be called, was appreciable. In only minutes he was back at his cache of groceries.

After eating half the fruitcake and a little cheese, he fashioned his coat into a sling for the groceries, knotting the sleeves together and buttoning it closed. With one

hand at the collar and the other about the hem, he could carry all his food with him.

He looked up the descending staircase with a scornful smile, for he had decided with the wisdom of failure to abandon that venture. If the stairs wished to take him down, then down, giddily, he would go.

Down he did go, down dizzily, down, down and always, it seemed, faster, spinning about lightly on his heels at each landing so that there was hardly any break in the wild speed of his descent. He whooped and hallooed and laughed to hear his whoopings echo in the narrow, low-vaulted corridors, following him as though they could not keep up his pace.

Down, ever deeper down.

Twice he slipped at the landings and once he missed his footing in mid-leap on the escalator, hurtled forward, letting go of the sling of groceries and falling, hands stretched out to cushion him, onto the steps, which, imperturbably, continued their descent.

He must have been unconscious then, for he woke up in a pile of groceries with a split cheek and a splitting headache.

He knew then his first moment of terror—a premonition that there was no end to his descent, but this feeling gave way quickly to a laughing fit.

"I'm going to hell!" he shouted, though he could not drown out the steady purr of the escalators. "This is the way to hell. Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

—If only I were, he reflected. —If that were the case, it would make sense. Not quite orthodox sense, but some sense, a little.

Sanlty, however, was so integral to his character that neither hysteria nor horror could long have their way with him. He gathered up his groceries again, relieved to find that only the jar of instant coffee had been broken this time. After reflection he also discarded the can of drip-ground coffee, for which he could conceive no use—under the present circumstances. And he would allow himself, for the sake of sanity, to conceive of no other circumstances than those.

He began a more deliberate descent. He returned to Vanity Fair, reading it as he paced down the down-going steps. He did not let himself consider the extent of the abyss into which he was plunging, and the vicarious excitements of the novel helped him keep his thoughts from his own situation. At page 255, he lunched (that is, he took his second meal of the day) on the remainder of the cheese and fruitcake; at 523 he rested and dined on the English cookies dipped in peanul butter.

—Perhaps I had better ration my food.

If he could regard his absurd dilemma as merely a struggle for survival, another chapter in his own Robinson Crusoe story, he might get to the bottom of this mechanized vortex alive and sane. He thought proudly that many people in his position could not have adjusted, would have gone mad.

Of course, he was descending . . .

But he was still sane. He had chosen his course and now he was following it. There was no night in the stairwell, and scarcely any shadows. He slept when his legs could no longer bear his weight and his eyes were tearful from reading. Sleeping, he dreamt that he was continuing his descent on the escalators. Waking, his hand resting on the rubber railing that moved along at the same rate as the steps, he discovered this to be the case.

Somnambulistically, he had ridden the escalators farther down into this mild, interminable hell, leaving behind his bundle of food and even the unfinished novel.

Stumbling up the escalators, he began, for the first time, to cry. Without the novel, there was nothing to *tbink* of but this, this . . .

-How far? How long did I sleep?

His legs, which had only been slightly wearied by his descent, gave out twenty flights up. His spirit gave out soon after. Again he turned around, allowed himself to be swept up by the current—or, more exactly, swept down.

The escalator seemed to be traveling more rapidly, the pitch of the steps to be more pronounced. But he no longer trusted the evidence of his senses.

—I am, perhaps, insane—or sick from hunger. Yet, I would have run out of food eventually. This will bring the crisis to a head. Optimism, that's the spirit!

Continuing his descent, he occupied himself with a closer analysis of his environment, not undertaken with any hope of bettering his condition but only for lack of other diversions. The walls and ceiling were hard, smooth, and off-white. The escalator steps were a dull nickel color, the treads being somewhat shinier, the crevices darker. Did that mean that the treads were polished from use? Or were they designed in that fashion? The treads were half an inch wide and spaced apart from each other by the same width. They projected slightly over the edge of each step, resembling somewhat the head of a barber's shears. Whenever he stopped at a landing, his attention would become fixed on the illusory "disappearance" of the steps, as they sank flush to the floor and slid, tread in groove, into the grilled baseplate.

Less and less would he run, or even walk, down the stairs, content merely to ride his chosen step from top to bottom of each flight and, at the landing, step (left foot, right, and left again) onto the escalator that would transport him to the floor below. The stairwell now had tunneled, by his calculations, miles beneath the department store—so many miles that he began to congratulate himself upon his unsought adventure, wondering if he had established some sort of record, Just so, a criminal will stand in awe of his own baseness and be most proud of his vilest crime, which he believes unparalleled.

In the days that followed, when his only nourishment was the water from the fountains provided at every tenth landing, he thought frequently of food, preparing imaginary meals from the store of groceries he had left behind, savoring the ideal sweetness of the honey, the richness of the soup which he would prepare by soaking the powder in the empired cookie tin, mixing it with the film of gelatin lining the opened can of corned beef. When he thought of the six cans of tuna fish, his anxiety became

intolerable, for he had (would have had) no way to open them. Merely to stamp on them would not be enough. What, then? He turned the question over and over in his head, to no avail.

Then a curious thing happened. He quickened again the speed of his descent, faster now than when he had first done this, cagerly, headlong, absolutely heedless. The several landings seemed to flash by like a montage of Flight, each scarcely perceived before the next was before him. A demonic, pointless race—and why? He was running, so the thought, toward his store of groceries, either believing that they had been left below or thinking that he was running up. Clearly, he was delirious.

It did not last. His weakened body could not maintain the frantic pace, and he woke from his delirium confused and utterly spent. Now began another, more rational delirium, a madness fired by logic. Lying on the landing, rubbing his ankle, he speculated on the nature, origin, and purpose of the escalators. Reasoned thought was of no more use to him, however, than unreasoning action. Ingenuity was helpless to solve a riddle that had no answer, which was its own reason, self-contained and whole. He—not the escalators—needed an answer.

Perhaps his most interesting theory was the notion that these escalators were a kind of exercise wheel, like those found in a squirrel cage, from which, because it was a closed system, there could be no escape. This theory required some minor alterations in his conception of the physical universe, which had always appeared highly Euclidean to him before, a universe in which his descent seemingly along a plumb line was, in fact, describing a loop. This theory cheered him, for he might hope, coming full circle, to return to his store of groceries again, if not to Underwood's, Perhaps in his abstracted state he had passed one or the other already several times without observing.

There was another, and related, theory concerning the measures taken by Underwood's Department Store against delinquent accounts. This was mere paranoia.

—Theories I don't need theories. I must get on with it. So, favoring his bad leg, he continued his descent, although his speculations did not immediately cease. They became, if anything, more metaphysical. They became vague. Eventually, he could regard the escalators as being entirely matter-of-fact, requiring no more explanation than, by their sheer existence, they offered him.

He discovered he was losing weight. Being so long without food (by the evidence of his beard, he estimated that more than a week had gone by), this was only to be expected. Yet, there was another possibility he could not exclude: he was approaching the center of the earth, where, as he understood, all things were weightless.

—Now that, he thought, is something worth striving for. He had discovered a goal. On the other hand, he was dying, a process he did not give all the attention it deserved. Unwilling to admit this eventuality and yet not so foolish as to admit any other, he side-stepped the issue by pretending to hope.

—Maybe someone will rescue me, he hoped.

But his hope was as mechanical as the escalators he rode—and tended, in much the same way, to sink.

Waking and sleeping were no longer distinct states of which he could say: "Now I am sleeping," or "Now I am awake." Sometimes he would discover himself descending and be unable to tell whether he had been woken from sleep or roused from inattention.

He hallucinated.

A woman, loaded with parcels from Underwood's and wearing a pillbox-style hat, came down the escalator toward him, turned around on the landing, high heels clicking smartly, and rode away without even nodding to him.

More and more, when he awoke or was roused from his stupor, he found himself, instead of hurrying to his goal, lying on a landing, weak, dazed, and beyond hunger. Then he would crawl to the down-going escalator and pull himself onto one of the steps, which he would ride to the bottom, sprawled head foremost, hands and shoulders braced against the treads to keep from skittering bumpily down.

—At the bottom, he thought, —at the bottom . . . I will . . . when I get there . . .

From the bottom, which he conceived of as the center of the earth, there would be literally nowhere to go but up. Probably by another chain of escalators, ascending escalators, but preferably by an elevator. It was important to believe in a bottom.

Thought was becoming as difficult, as demanding and painful, as once his struggle to ascend had been. His perceptions were fuzzy. He did not know what was real and what imaginary. He thought he was eating and discovered he was gnawing at his hands.

He thought he had come to the bottom. It was a large, high-recllinged room. Signs pointed to another escalator: Ascending. But there was a chain across it and a small typed announcement.

"Out of order. Please bear with us while the escalators are being repaired. Thank you. The Management."

He laughed weakly.

He devised a way to open the tuna fish cans. He would slip the can sideways beneath the projecting treads of the escalator, just at the point where the steps were sinking flush to the floor. Either the escalator would split the can open or the can would jam the escalator. Perhaps if one escalator were jammed the whole chain of them would stop. He should have thought of that before, but he was, nevertheless, outie pleased to have thought of it at all.

—I might have escaped.

His body seemed to weigh so little now. He must have come hundreds of miles. Thousands.

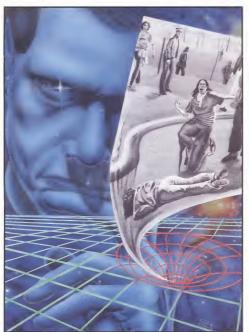
Again, he descended.

Then, he was lying at the foot of the escalator. His head rested on the cold metal of the baseplate and he was looking at his hand, the fingers of which were pressed into the creviced grill. One after another, in perfect order, the steps of the escalator slipped into these crevices, tread in groove, rasping at his fingertips, occasionally tearing away a sliver of his flesh.

That was the last thing he remembered.

Kent State Descending the Gravity Well

An Analysis of the Observer



James Alan Gardner

According to the Kerr-Newman model of a rotating black hole, there is a region just outside the event horizon where certain space and time vectors switch properties with each other. This is just mathematics, you understand, merely a quirk of the formulas-physically, nothing changes wildly until you get inside the black hole itself, and then who cares what happens? Double deluxe chocolate chip cookies could spontaneously spring into being and it wouldn't matter to the universe outside. Reality may break down inside a black hole. but the effects never percolate out into our familiar space.

Just outside the black hole however, if it's rotating, if the model is correct, there is a region called the ergosphere where certain vector fields describing the flow of space and time do a flip-flop. When I was trying to understand what this meant, I told myself that places became moments and

Illustration by Paul McCall

moments became places. Think of that, Places became moments. Moments became places.

Fifteen years ago, I did my master's thesis on black holes. In those days, I could have explained the math to you. Now I've forgotten it all. I look at the book containing my thesis and the only thing I remember is how hard it was to type all those equations. The meaning of the equations has dribbled out of my understanding a grain at a time, and now all I hold on to is this; just outside a spinning black hole, in a region called the ergosphere, places become moments and moments become places.

Think of that,

Kent State University entered the ergosphere at 12:24 P.M. on Monday, May 4, 1970, when the Ohio State National Guard opened fire on demonstrators protesting American involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia. Four students were killed: nine others were wounded.

Kent State ceased to be a place and became a moment. Like Hiroshima. Like Chernobyl. Kent State fell off the map and became thirteen seconds of gunfire on a warm spring day. And maybe it kept dropping down the gravity well, from the ergosphere straight into the black hole.

Here is an ugly truth: back in 1970, when I heard the news about the Kent State killings, I felt smug.

I was fifteen years old. I was Canadian. It pleased me in a spiteful way that the U. S. had so blatantly screwed up.

I was fifteen. I was self-righteous. I had never been to a funeral.

The vectors that flip-flop in the ergosphere indicate symmetries in the gravitational field. One vector is timelike; the laws of gravity don't change over time. The other vector is spacelike; it describes the rotational symmetry of the black hole.

These vectors are called Killing vectors. Really. They're named after a Professor Wilhelm K. J. Killing of the University of Minster. He gave his name to such geometrical objects in 1892, decades before Kerr and Newman used them in their model of a rotating black hole.

Killing vectors.

May 4, 1990, was a Friday. All the local newspapers saved their Kent State retrospectives for the weekend editions. I bought three papers that Saturday—the Globe 6 Mail for its book reviews, the Kitchener-Waterloo Record for local movie Isitings, and the Toronto Star for Donosbury.

I didn't realize it was the 20th anniversary of Kent State until I saw a commemorative article in the first paper I read. That article was written by a Kent State journalism student who happened to be in the right place at the right time to get the greatest news story of his life. The reporter told about his day: the rumors that something bad had happened at the noon rally, his race to get his camera, his sneaking through bushes to reach the parking lot where the killings took place, many details about the aftermath. . . but strangely, the reporter

omitted any information about the victims themselves. He didn't even give their names.

The article in the second paper talked about the effect of the killings on the American psyche. Was it really the turning point in the Vietnam War, the moment when public consciousness crossed some uncrasable line? Or was it just another straw on the camel's bendling back?

The victims weren't named in this article either. Just four dead students, Four dead in O-hi-o.

Kent State is about 270 kilometers from my living room. I've never been there; it feels like a very distant place.

My wife's parents live more than 450 kilometers away. We visit them several times a year.

It was only in the third paper that I found a list of those who died. Four students, two women, two men:

Allison Krause Sandy Lee Scheuer
Jeff Miller
This was the only information given about the victims:
just their names. The article in the third paper was about
the backroom machinations that made sure no charges
were successfully laid against the National Guard.

I sat in my living moun, three thick newspapers on the floor around my chair, and I wondered why all three treated the victims as if they were irrelevant to the story. Certainly, the National Guard did not specifically target those four students; the Guard could easily have killed four different people, or a dozen people, or none. But why should that matter? Randomness shouldn't mean irrelevance.

The papers bypassed the reality of the victims, their lives, the grief of their friends and family, as if those things had nothing to do with the "real" story.

As if the four dead students were only there for the body count.

As if the students had no reality either before or after the shootings, but only in the moments when they lay bleeding on the pavement of a parking lot.

First Scribble: The Funeral Run

McGregor grimaced as be reached the door of the time chamber. Inside, the lights bad been mutted from their usual glare to a moody brown tint. Dimness meant a funeral run: the group going out this morning would not come back.

If he'd been in charge—McGregor spent much of his time draming of how the Corrections Institute would change if he were in charge—If McGregor were in charge, be'd scrap the gloom and doom, maybe put in something extrawagant like orange flashers or a circus-holo show. Correctors on a fineral run were depressed enough already. They didn't need the brooding browns, and the staff talking in husbed tones. Why not throw a bash instead? Crack open the booze, crank up the music, give the por bitms some last good memories of the twentybrid century. But the Executive Board were all tish-colbrid century.

lars sending out memos about "good taste" and "appropriateness," and they never ever had to push the button that sent people off to die.

McGregor passed an eye over the four people in the chamber-not lingering long enough to fix the faces in bis memory because be had enough had dreams already. thank you very mucb-but be wanted to see whom be was dealing with. His subjects, Two male, two female, Apparent ages somewhere between 18 and 24. No way to tell if they'd been sculpted for the run or if these were their actual faces. Some correction jobs had specific requirements; some just needed bodies

None of the people, the subjects, looked familiar, McGregor prided himself on his knowledge of history. A good grasp of history distinguished a professional from a mere button-busher. He'd recognize faces taken from history if they were important. These weren't; they were just faces. And he'd spent far too long looking at them. Tonight in his dreams, he might remember that dimpled chin, those sleepy eyes. He didn't need that crap, especially not when JoAnne already complained about bow restless he was in bed. Grunting, he turned away from the door and stalked to the control booth.

"You look like you're in a hell of a mood," Ramirez said as McGregor threw himself into his chair. "JoAnne on the rap?'

"Ha ba," be replied. He had no intention of voicing his feelings to Ramirez. She didn't give a damn whether this was a funeral run or one of the truly upheat correction jobs, like the times they inserted top-of-the-line medical teams to save important lives. Only jerks got involved with the subjects; she'd said that once. So now, out of pride, McGregor pretended to be as blasé as she was . . . and of course, felt like a jerk for pretending.

"Who have we got today?" he asked, trying to sound breezy

Ramirez waved ber band at McGregor's display screen where separate windows showed the official correction authorization, several temporal navigation charts, the latest chronal flux reports, and background data on the people in the time chamber. "We have your typical funeral run volunteers," Ramirez said. "Afflicted with your usual grab bag of terminal conditions, none contagious, and also afflicted with your garden-variety burning need to do something meaningful before they sink down the gravity well. If you want more details, read the 'History Thanks' notices in Corrections Daily.

"Forget it," McGregor told ber. He had bis newsreader programmed to skip the "History Thanks" column, After be'd sent someone on a funeral run, he didn't need to know that the deceased did needlework, or had once dreamed of being an architect. "What time are we trying to hit?" he asked.

"Early Ianuary 1970, late December 1969 if we have to," Ramirez replied. "The correction goes down May 4, 1970, but we have to insert them early enough to establish camouflage."

"They can establish camouflage in only four months?" "Prep department says it bulled out all the stops building background this time. Birth certificates, employment records, vaccinations-that Prep creep Terry Ling was in just before you got here, trying to impress me. You wouldn't believe bow bad be wants into my pants. Anyway, Ling said four months was the max for camouflage on this group because that's the most the doctors can guarantee. Wouldn't want the subjects to snuff it ahead of schedule . . .

You get the idea. Time travelers dropped onto the Kent State campus for the purpose of dving. Their deaths were necessary to shape the future properly-otherwise, opposition to the war in Vietnam wouldn't intensify fast enough and the future would go to hell. I could invent an appropriate description of that hell if it became relevant

I wrote the above passage on Saturday, May 5, 1990. The notion that sparked the story was, of course, that the four Kent State students badn't really existed before they were shot; they were dispatched from the future.

Part way through the writing, in the passage where McGregor scans the faces of the people waiting for the funeral run, I needed to know what the victims looked like. I made a quick trip to the library (it's only two blocks away), picked up three books on Kent State, and hurried back to the computer so I could keep writing. One of the books (The Truth About Kent State, by Peter Davies) had pictures of the four students on one of the very front pages. I made note of Sandy Lee Scheuer's dimpled chin, Bill Schroeder's sleepy eyes, and went back to writing.

Conscience didn't set in till later.

Look: the real students weren't terminal patients who nobly volunteered to die-they were just people in the wrong place at the wrong time and they died by random chance.

And they weren't just characters of convenience, devoid of families, with personalities tuned to make the story make sense. At the end of a day of writing, I thumbed through those books from the library and I read interviews with parents, friends, people who had known the victims all their lives. The students didn't come out of nowhere-they came from homes and neighborhoods that mourned, prayed, lost sleep, wept, all trying to come to grips with grief.

Reading those interviews, I felt ashamed.

Consider what an observer sees when an object descends into a black hole. For convenience, assume that the object is a burning candle that's somehow tough enough to withstand gravity's tidal forces around the hole.

As the candle falls, it takes longer and longer (from your point of view) for each particle of candlelight to climb the gravity well and reach your eye. Light particles emitted near the very edge of the black hole may take thousands of years to fight their way out to the universe at large. The result is that you perceive the candle falling for a potentially infinite length of time. Every now and then, another light particle struggles free of the black

hole's pull and reminds you of the candle's descent. It's an obvious metaphor for grief. Hot and burning at the start, dimming over time . . . but even after many years, memory particles surface now and then to remind you of a life that's gone.

I should point out that the candle's infinite fall is only in the eye of the outside observer. A trick of the light. From the candle's point of view, it drops straight down and crosses the event horizon without pause. Inside the black hole its flame may still be burning; it's just that the light doesn't reach the outside world any more.

The next morning, Sunday, May 6, 1990, I reread what I'd written, wondering if there was anything that could be salvaged. I was struck by a new regret: I'd written about some guy named McGregor, not about the students.

I knew why I'd written it that way, of course. I didn't believe I had the right to put words in their mouths, thoughts in their heads. How could I presume to speak for the real people? I could only deal with characters.

But I'd gone too far into the fiction. In my story, like the newspaper articles, the victims were only there for the body count. Without thinking, I'd started to write the story of a button-pusher who was troubled by his conscience, but who went ahead and did what he had to do for the good of history.

Sound familiar?

Second Scribble: The Button-Pusher

Bannister sat in the time chamber, cradling his gun, An M-I carbine in pristine condition. According to the antiquities database there were only five M-I s still in existence, four in museums, one in the bends of a collector who'd bough bers on the open market. You could assume another twenty or thirty of the weapons still in secret collections around the world... may be even a few stockpiled in the arsenals of some of the Quarantined states, since most of the QS were too stupid to realize that the black market price of a single 20th-century firearm would buy a bundred 33-de century E-gun.

Call it a nice round number of forty M-1s on the entire planet. And Bannister had one.

Admittedly, it could just be a replica, but be doubted that. The Corrections Institute disdained replicas. If they needed some antique, they sent back a Special Services team to steal one. Bannister had gone out on plenty of those runs binself—dropping in on foxbols to pull thee-Enffelds from the cold fingers of gas victims, or materializing in the cargo bolds of boats shipping a KA-Ts to terrorist groups. But as of today, Bannister had graduated from such gruntwork. As of today, be was going to make bistory.

"You about ready in there?" he called to the two techies in the control booth.

The woman of the pair flicked a switch and said over the intercom, "What's your burry? Got a hot date waiting?" "You got it," Bannister answered. "The date's May 4, 1070."

The intercom clicked off loudly. He wondered if the

woman was annoyed at his attitude. Maybe she'd been making some kind of pass. Maybe he should have said, "No date yet, but when I get back I'll be looking for action." The woman's lab coat hid her tits and ass, but the way she moved when she walked around the control booth—she was thinking of her body all the time, feeling it move, tuned in to being sensuous. A night with a woman like that would leave a memory or two.

And all the psych profiles said be d be borny afterward. It was pretty sich when you thought about it, but if borniness was natural, it was natural. A man didn't lose sleep if his body wanted to fart after eating beans—be just farted, didn't be? So if his body wanted to get laid after pulling the trigger on four strangers who died three bundred years ago...

The intercom clicked on again and the male techie said, "Departure in thirty seconds."

"Going to be a bumpy one?" Bannister asked. He was trying to sound cool, but the words came out too sharply. It was eagerness, only eagerness. He boped the woman in the booth wouldn't interpret it as nerves.

"The sea's calm as glass all the way back to 2042," the male techie replied. "Turhulence there, of course, but you've got clearance for one of the calmest straits in the area. Someone's definitely pulled strings on this run—smoothest route we've been authorized to navigate since the beginning of the year. The Executive Board must really want these blds dead."

"It's crucial to world peace," Bannister said.

"Yeah, right," The man clicked off the intercom again. Bannister named to shout back some kind of self-justification. The mission was crucial. No one liked killing, not even when it was necessary, but irrading four these for several bundred million... it had to be done. The deaths were the catalyst for change, so someone had to be the catalyst for deaths. Someone had to start the shooting up on Blanket Hill, had to spur the Ohio National Guard into putting Kent State University on the man.

Same setting as the piece I wrote on Saturday, but someone different in the time chamber. Someone who would join the Guard and instigate the tragedy. Someone who would have to face what he had done and eventually . . . well, I didn't know what would happen to Bannister. As the story unfolded, as I got to know him better, I would discover whether he went mad, found wisdom, became a soulless killer, whatever. Sometimes the reason you write a story is to learn how it turns out.

I spent most of Sunday morning on the Bannister story, but as time went on my doubs grew. By lunch I had to admit that my second try was just as corrupt as the first one. I was trying to reassure myself there was an underlying purpose to the events, that someone somewhere knew the price and made a choice. But I didn't believe that Furthermore, I didn't believe in letting the National Guard off the hook by suggesting they were spured on by extenior forces. As I sat in my study and comfortably sipped mint tea twenty years after the fact, it wasn't my place to lay blame; but it wasn't my place to make excusses either.

The Kerr-Newman model of a rotating black hole can be mathematically extended by recoordinatizing, using a scheme suggested by the work of M. D. Kruskal (1960). The result is a model wherein the black hole has a white hole on its flip side, just as the black hole is a phenomenon that no slower-than-light object can leave, a white hole is a phenomenon that no slower-than-light object can enter. Light and matter can flood out of a white hole, but nothing can get back inside. Beyond the white hole, the extended model shows an area of space whose physical characteristics are the same as our own familiar space outside the black hole—"another universe," if you want to look at it that way.

Extending mathematical models is a dicey business. I could, if I wanted, extend the thermometer below absolute zero Kelvin and find that (wow!) there was a whole other universe down there where temperatures were negative instead of positive. Mathematically, I could argue that it's valid; physically, it's nonsense. One mustn't get carried away believing scribbles on paper.

But the black hole/white hole model is more satisfying than an unadorned black hole. The white hole completes the black hole's story. Things vanish into a black hole and it seems they are gone forever, but unknown to us, they pass through the darkness, through crushing forces, through a moment of infinity at the very heart of the black hole, and then they flood out the other side into a new and brighty illuminated universe.

It could be the oldest story in the world. Ra in his sunboat. Jonah in the whale. Dying heroes and deities from every culture on the planet.

The journey into blackness. The dark night of the soul. The moment of trial and grace. Glorious liberation and rebirth into a new world.

Kerr-Newman has it all.

I've never heard anyone talk about the black hole/ white hole model from a theological viewpoint. No one is comfortable with theology anymore. I know I'm not.

But I'm comfortable with ghost stories.

Third Scribble: The Kent State Jamboree

Walpurgisnacht came a few days late in 1990. Blame it on precession of the equinox, global warming, or whatever your pet cause might be—Walpurgisnacht 1990 fell on the night of May 4.

The bonor of the first sighting went to Benjamin Howe, third-year math student at Kent State University, Kent, Obio. On May 4, Howe spent an uncomfortable evening sitting on the floor in Taylor Hall, boping to intercept one Catherine Weiss as she left a night class. For the past six months, Howe and Weiss bad shared a relationship, but that aftermoon a discussion of what they would do over the summer break had not gone well. It had, in fact, sucked rocks, Neither of them shoulted, neither of them cried; but after they went their separate ways, both full sick in the pits of their stomachs, wondering if bits was fix his pits of their stomachs, wondering if bits was fix.

if it was all over, if they had ruined the best chance at love they would ever get. By suppertime, both wanted to apologize as profusely as necessary. It was just a matter of finding each other before it was too late.

Howe knew that Weiss had a night class somewhere in Taylor Hall. He drave there and wandered the corridors, peeping into classrooms without spotting her. Eventually, he settled down on the floor near the exit that Weiss was most likely to take on her wasy home... provided she didn't take a different door as she headed for a sleetze-up at the pub with some slimy classmate. (Unbehowarst to House, Weiss hadn't gone to class that night. She'd parked berself outside Howe's apartment building and was waiting for him to come home, thinking he had probably gone to the pub to get slopply drunk with his buddies from differential geometry.)

Hours passed. Benjamin Howe watched the classes get out, tried to scan every woman who went by, but not to closely, not threateningly for fear one of them would report bin as a potential rapist. He stayed an hour after the last class went home, not because he believed Weiss was still in the building but because he bedae no tdea what to do next. He considered going to the pub to see if she was there; he considered phoning her friends, he considered phoning the beoptials, be considered walking aim-lessly around campus in the hope that fate would bring them together again, the way it did in the movies.

Finally he decided to go home.

When he got to the parking lot, his was the only car left. That made it easy to see the long dark smear trailing out from underneath. "Great," he muttered to binsself. "The end of a perfect day, Must have thrown a stone through the oil pan."

He got down on bis knees to look. It was after eleven o'clock, and even though the parking lot was well lit, he could see only darkness under the chassis. A deep darkness, a black lump blocking out the light that should have been visible on the other stde of the car.

Jesus Christ, he thought, I hit something. A dog. I must have hit a dog. Nothing else could be that hig, except . . . no, it had to be a dog.

He looked again at the smear on the pavement. The parking lot's blue-white streetlamps bleached out most of the color, but he could convince himself the smear was red.

Howe didn't want to touch the body, but be couldn't, drive off with something stuck under there. Standing up, be walked to the edge of the parking lot and back to build up his nerve, then squatted at the rear of his car and reached under.

It was like reaching into a freezer cold and a bit clammy. The night was warm, and be couldn't imagine bow it could be so cold under there, but first things first. Pull the damned thing out, then worry about thermodynamics. He swept his band back and forth, trying to grab some part of the animal, trying to do it blind because be really didn't want to look at it any soomer than he bad to. Nothing, nothing but the cold. The dog must be farther under than be thought.

James Alan Gardner

He went down on his knees again and looked. From







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IBM AMIGA this angle, the light was good enough that he could make out a running shoe.

For a moment, be couldn't breathe. He'd known all along, badn't be'l thad been far too big for a dog, be just badn't let hinself tbat... that be'd killed someone. He'd killed someone. It wasn't possible, but be'd killed someone. Almost without thinking, be reached out to touch the shoe.

His hand felt only cold air.

Darkness or not, he could see quite clearly. His hand reached straight through the foot.

And then, because this <u>was</u> Kent State, and because every student knew this was <u>the</u> parking lot, Benjamin Howe realized what he was seeing.

He gai into the car, started it carefully, and backed up. There was no sound of dragging, no sound of flesh and bone crushing under the tires. When he'd backed up far enough, there was only the sight of a body bleeding on the pavement. A guy about Benjamin's age, wearing rathy jeans and a T-sbirt.

There was another body not far off. A woman's. A third corpse part way out, and a fourth in the middle of the road out of the lot. He cranked the wheel hard, bopped over the curb onto the grass, and kept driving.

When Benjamin Howe got back to his apartment, Cathy Weiss was still there. She thought that he treated her coldly at first, but he seemed glad to see her.

Back on campus, more bodies were appearing. At 11:30 the village of My Lai materialized in the football practice field beside the Taylor Hall parking lot—the village was close to Kent State in spirit, if not geography.

The materialization was observed by chemistry grad student Rebecca Kendall, who bad been awake 36 hours studying for exams. The sight of the phantom village terrified her... not because she thought it was a ghost, but because she thought it was a ablaticination. The prospect of ber mind breaking down filled her with fear, icy and pure. Her brain was all she had no frends, no easy social graces, no Playboy bunny face and flesh, just her brain. And now ber brain swa a ragged clutter of buts and butchered bodies out in the middle of a football field.

Rebecca started shivering and couldn't stop. If someone convinced ber she was seeing a gbost she would leel nothing but relief. As it was, she walked bome in a cold sweat, and went straight to bed. She didn't fall asleep for many bours.

On campus at quarter to twelve, a crowel of martyrs flickered into existence atop Blanke Hill... on the usual martyrs celebrated for clinging to their beliefs in the face of death, but the ones who died by meaningless human violence, without the chance to be brave. Innocent women accused of witchcraft, hanged and drouned and burned. Civilians whose bones lay in the path of marching armies. Tribespeople who succumbed to disease, starvation and sorrow in the cargo bolds of slave ships. Hundreds of unmoving bodies appeared on Blanket Hill, many of them touching or overlaphing: a young widow cremated in suttee, lying with ber head on the chest of a teenage boy who froze in Siberia because his uncle denounced Stalin; a drowned passenger from KAL 007 linking arms with one from the tranian Airbus A300.

As midnight approached, more and more bodies accumulated, in the roadways, on the Common, inside the buildings. Fearing panic, University Security evacuated the on-campus pub when Bhopal victims began filling the dance floor. "Nothing to worry about," the security officers said as they burried people out. "We'll take care of it"

"What are you going to do?" a student asked. "Call in the National Guard?"

That was my question too. What was I going to do? Call in the National Guard?

Look; ghosts appear because they have unfinished business. And if anyone has unfinished business, it must be those who were killed senselessly. But what can they do to finish their stories? Should the four Kent State students haunt the living National Guardsmen and torment them for their acts? That's so cheap: just crude revenge.

Should the bodies all come to life at midnight and just take a few hours to come to terms with their deaths? Maybe this happens twice a year like business conventions, Walpurgisnacht and Hallowe'en, each get-together hosted by different committees—the socree fans at Hillisborough, say, or the Jews and gypsies and gays processed though Nazi death camps—and the goal is simply to purge anger and regret, a little bit more each meeting, until finally the soul is ready to let go and move on. I could envision the Kent State students wandering their old campus, talking to night-owl students, trying to find peace. . . .

Students at Kent State were demonstrating for peace when the victims died.

I broke off writing for supper. Sunday supper, traditional time in North America for family, conviviality. I don't remember how convivial I was. I could have been distracted because I wanted to get back to writing after dinner.

But when I went back, I realized I had trivialized the subject again. It wasn't just that the tone of voice was flippant; it was the glibness with which I tossed off references to tragedy. My Lai, for example—what did I know about the My Lai massacre except that a lot of Vietnanyese civilians were killed? I could research and find more details, but that wasn't the point. I had used the name My Lai for its immediate guts 'n' gore familiarity, not out of genuine feeling for the victims. The same for all the other ghosts—I had used them to give the story color, nothing more. They were only empty names. They were just body count.

I stared at the computer screen for a long time, wondering what to write . . . wondering if there was anything I could write that wasn't just exploiting someone else's pain.

Nothing came to mind

A mathematical singularity is a place where a function, a formula, breaks down. Often, the breakdown happens because the function "goes to infinity" at that point; for example, the formula for the function may try to divide by zero.

In the heart of a Kerr-Newman black hole there is a singularity in the function called R, the Riemannian scalar curvature, a measurement of gravity. R goes to infinity. It cannot be measured.

For a long time, physicists wondered if the singularity was genuine. Maybe it was simply a result of their choice of coordinates: the way they wrote out the formula for R. With the right choice of coordinates, one can extend the black hole model past the singularity into the white hole beyond. Perhaps with another choice of coordinates, the singularity in the middle would go away. Perhaps it was only the ruler that broke down, not the universe that the ruler measured.

In the late 1960's, mathematicians proved that the singularity existed in all coordinates. All possible rulers broke at the same point. At the heart of the black hole's darkness, physicists could only throw away their rulers and stand back in contemplation.

Days and weeks passed. I kept thinking. Nothing more, just thinking. I didn't see the dead students in my dreams. To tell the truth, if I wanted to remember their faces I had to go back and look at their photos in the book.

Kent State didn't haunt me. It niggled at me.

and be left with three uncompleted stories that all

The library books came due. I wrote the names of the books in my files and took them back. I also recorded the names:

Sandy Lee Scheuer Allison Krause Jeff Miller Bill Schroeder Those names hadn't appeared anywhere in my three story attempts. I had to write them down separately so I would remember them. Otherwise I'd lose the names

missed the point.

Now and then I would open my "ideas" notebook and see my original jottings about Kent State. Time travel, Ghosts, But I couldn't travel backward in time, I couldn't summon ghosts or lay them to rest. I could fill stories into empty spaces surrounding the tragedy, but the stories themselves walled off the reality, put it out of reach.

The situation reminded me of a white hole. A white hole floods its universe with light; but you can never touch it.

And so I began thinking of white holes, black holes, and a thesis whose math had leaked away, leaving behind only metaphors. The result wasn't a story about Kent State. But at least it was my story to tell.

Imagine an object falling into a black hole: something small like the body of a young man or woman, or perhaps something large like the campus of a university.

Imagine an outside observer, a distant observer far removed from the immediate pull of the black hole. He shines a light toward the falling object-the object casts no light of its own, so if the observer wants to see it he must provide his own illumination. He waits for his light to strike the object, then return to his eve.

The light may strike the object as it falls through the ergosphere, a region where places become moments and moments become places. That close to the black hole itself, the returning light particles may take years to climb back out of the gravity well and reach the observer.

Or the light may not reach the falling object until the object has crossed the event horizon. At the time the outside observer shines the light, he can't tell if the falling object is actually outside or inside the hole. If the object is inside the hole, the light may strike the object and bounce, but it cannot reach the observer outside. The light will only bounce deeper into the blackness. The observer will never see it.

Or perhaps, if the cosmos deigns to conform itself to mathematics, there is a third alternative. The falling object plunges through the heart of the black hole and out a white hole on the other side. By the time the observer's light enters the black hole, the object is gone. The light finds nothing but blackness. There is no contact. To the observer, the object has fallen into impenetrable dark; but in another universe, perhaps, the object tranquilly sails on.

The outside observer waits for his light to return. He wonders if the object has fallen so far that he will never truly see it. There is no way to tell until the light actually comes back. If it ever does.

Other observers have given up and gone home. The outside observer waits. +

Broken Highway



J. R. Dunn

Getting out of town was always the bad part. Moran took his time, keeping to the speed limit and stopping at the lights. All the same, he didn't relax until he passed the city limits.

He headed south, toward Fargo. The Committee wanted him in San Francisco in two days, which was cutting it close, but there was something he had to see before he turned west.

The road was smooth and almost featureless, with a lot less traffic than he was used to. On either side the land stretched flat to the horizon. The sky had weight here, a presence it lacked in more uneven country. He didn't like it. It made him feel uncomfortable, as if he were under some kind of inspection.

He passed nothing but farms until he got to Reynolds, a greasy spot about twenty miles down the highway, Just outside town a state trooper was sitting on the shoulder; Moran drove past with his eyes forward. A hundred yards on he reached out almost instinctively and slapped the glove compartment; it had a bad habit of flapping open. He wished he'd slipped the piece into the hiding place behind the dash, but there had been no time.

Wustration by Pat Momssey

He stopped at the town's one red light. A station wagon pulled up beside him, a nice-looking redhead at the wheel. She turned and regarded him, giving him a smile. He dropped his eyes. For a second he had seen Angie, as he had been seeing her every day for the last two years.

When the light changed he drove on without looking again in her direction and soon left the car behind. It was several miles before he glanced in the mirror.

Brooding, he steered the Ford without really taking in the road. He'd thought it would end sometime, but that wasn't how it had turned out at all. He still saw Angie everywhere, on the street, in clubs, at malls, in women y that at second glance showed no resemblance to her whatsoever. There were nights he would wake up in darkness thinking she was beside him and lunge to consciousness only to meet the same disappointment, staying up until dawn drinking and watching old flicks on the tube. That was how it was: a last breakfast together, a joke taken the wrong way, a touch as she went out the door and a promise to make it up to her later, and then nothing but bleakness and silence.

But the worst was not to know what had happened, whether she'd been killed or was being used in some way that he couldn't imagine, aware, perhaps, of what was being done to her. . . .

He found himself hoping once again that she was dead.

The outpost appeared as he drove over a low rise, probably the highest point in the county. At the sight of it he felt his despair turn into rage. He pushed himself forward in the seat, eyes fixed on the thing up ahead. When the horn of a pickup truck blared at him to get back into his lane, he didin't even look around.

A couple miles on he pulled over. Getting out, he walked into the pasture bordering the road. He halted and looked back toward Grand Forks. He didn't know how much time he had before the cops would be alerted. Somebody was going to spot those stains on the carpet, open that closet door.

He turned once more to the thing that dominated the horizon. As always, his mind worked to put a pattern on it, and as always failed. It was shapeless and ever-changing, with nothing in normal experience to compare it to. Bluish purple, with streaks of what might be dark green near the peak. There seemed to be lights shining from within it, but they vanished when he tried to focus on them. As he watched it reformed itself, jumping from one apparent state to another with no sign of intervening motion.

Cities, buildings, bases—no one knew what they were. The government called them outposts, for what that was worth. There were twenty-three of them in the U. S., for y more worldwide. Nothing about them was understood, not the colors, the lights, or the shape-changes. Some physicists said that they didn't fully exist in space-time; there were weird effects on both the atomic and macro levels close up. Although the Less esemed to live in them, they had—as usual—no explanation for them comprehensible to humans. The one man who had officially en-

tered one, a NASA scientist, had been in no shape to speak when he came out and had given only incoherent descriptions.

The outposts had appeared nearly simultaneously three years ago, causing the kind of panie you'd expect. A few hours later the Lese had trundled out, grotesque, asymmetrical aside from the elongated helicopter shape, no two alike although it was hard to define what the differences were. They'd introduced themselves, assured everyone that their intentions were peaceful—once it had been explained what that meant—and the world had gone wild.

Moran remembered the nonsense that had made the rounds—"Brothers among the stars," "We are no longer alone," and so on ad nauseam. There had been a lot of noise about how the human race would fully understand itself for the first time, through comparison with another intelligence. When he'd heard that, Moran had' thought it was bullshit, and he hadn't been wrong.

Because there was no comparison. Biologically the Lesc had nothing in common with human beings aside from being based on carbon. They didn't even have DNA, or anything like it. Their method of reproduction was a mystery—when asked, the answers they gave made no sense at all. The same was true of everything else. They gave no reason why they had come or what they were doing now that they were here. They didn't seem to be hiding anything. Their minds just didn't work the way humans' did, and that was the end of it.

Not that they'd had no impact—far from it. They'd offered a number of devices and breakthroughs as a kind of rent or gift—small, cheap fusors; a room-temperature superconductor that came in the form of a tape; new methods of creating and storing antimatter, to name a few. Some machines that the Less seemed to think were needed nobody could figure out at all, either how they worked or what they were for. Others did things that the Feds didn't talk about, Just like the disappearances.

He was about to turn away when something happened that had occurred only twice before. The outpost seemed to grow, to lunge out and loom over him, becoming the only object in his world. His eyes locked onto a spot in the center of it, where the murky surface began to clear, revealing something that he couldn't describe but which seemed to tig at his very core. He felt drawn toward it, a desire deeper than sex, than love, than survival itself. His right foot began to inch forward.

With an effort of will he stopped moving and stood frozen, leaning forward on one leg. The pull increased, a promise beyond words, beyond the power of the mind to hold. He felt himself grinning savagely. Very slowly, he lifted his foot and began to draw it back, fighting the force that pulled at him.

Suddenly it ceased, exactly as if they'd discovered what kind of fish they'd hooked and had cut it loose. Overbalanced, he lurched backward, nearly falling flat on his ass. Shaking, he regarded the outpost, now gone back to its normal state, if there was such a thing. He was still grinning, skull-like, his eyes wide. He laughed deep in his throat and spat before going to the car.

Back to the outpost, he leaned on the car hood to pull himself together. He poked at the loose dit with the pointed toe of one of his western boots. They were new; he'd bought them in Grand Forls two days ago while checking the target out. Everybody here wore them, though they wen for the square toes. Morann liked the points himself. He figured if you were going to turn cowboy, you may as well go the whole route. On the drive out here he'd noticed that a lot of the barbed wire fences had old boots stuck on top of the posts, Idly he wondered what that was all about.

He looked over his shoulder. The outpost had changed again and was now bright pink. He thought of Angie and pushed it away, but there was nothing left to replace it beyond the cold hollowness that he'd never gotten used to. He shook his head. Nothing out here but he and the enemy, and there was no way that he could touch them. He got in the car and went on.

He drove slowly for a few miles, holding the speed down to about thirty for no more reason than he felt like it. He tried to ignore the outpost, but that was impossible—this one was huge and would stay in sight for twenty miles or more.

Coming here had been a mistake. It always worked out the same way—challenging them made him feel good for the moment but left him with nothing more than frustration that lasted for days afterward. He'd have to take a break when he got to Frisco, do something to shake himself out of his rut. Get drunk, find a girl and make a night of it. He didn't know what the West Coast Committee wanted from him—probably another assignment like this one—but they'd give him some free time. They had no choice, really; there weren't many who were willing to do what Moran did.

He pushed himself higher in the seat, trying to look forward to the trip. Yeah. Frisco was a hopping town. You could have a pretty good time out there.

The outpost was still in sight; in fact it seemed even larger. The road must curve in that direction.

À famhouse appeared, obviously empty, People didn't remain around the outposts very long. No particular reason, the Lesc didn't bother anybody; just a malaise, a feeling of uneae. There had been breakdowns, even a couple of suicides. He'd seen one story about it, maybe six months after the arrival, and then nothing. Another unanswered question, along with the disappearances and the behavior of people who spent too much time around the Lesc.

He'd thought at first that it was a conspiracy, that it was all being suppressed, but had changed his mind. People simply didn't want to know. The Lesc had appeared in the middle of the Great Recession, and their gifts had boosted the economy worldwide and fueled the boom that was still going on. They kept to themselves, seldom emerging from the outposts. What was really happening was easy to ignore compared to the benefits.

But the Committee knew it all, and was working against it. Putting data together piece by piece—there were files a foot thick; Moran had seen them—and stopping what damage they could through persuasion, pressure and ... He hit the brakes, giving the wheel a quarter-turn so that the car slewed around to face the direction he had come. He didn't worry about traffic; he'd seen nothing on the road since the pickup had passed him ten miles back.

A hundred yards behind stood a clump of buildings: diner, gas station, a few houses. The diner and the houses were empty, no question about that. All were dark, the plate-glass windows of the diner smashed, and they had that indefinable air of buildings no longer in use. No, it was the gas station that had caught his eye. There was something about it that told him it wasn't abandoned. Not the windows; the one on this side had a hole in it he could see from here. The pumps appeared operational, but that wasn't it either. His cycbrows rose as he saw what it was a sign in the front with the current price for a gallon of regular, a buck and a half, on those plastic cards they used. It wasn't even chained.

Putting the car in gear, he drove back to the station. He saw no movement inside but there seemed to be a light on. He passed the place, then swung around and approached it once again. He tried to think of what to say if there actually was somebody in there. The tank was nearly full; he'd made sure of that in Grand Forks. The car itself couldn't be in better shape—he wasn't so stupid as to go out on a Committee job without having it checked out. He pursed his lips as he eased up to the pumps. He'd just have to play it by ear.

Switching off the engine, he opened the door and got out. He rested an elbow atop the car and looked the place over. It was your typical flat-roofed box of a station: two bays and a small office, put up back in the sixties and a little worse for wear. The tile sides were streaked, the windows nearly opaque with dust, and the concrete stained with Christ alone knew how much oil and gas. Bending his head he peered into the office. The light inside, a twenty-watter or so, bardy penetrated the dirty glass. He straightened up and called out, "Yo," to no visible response.

He briefly considered walking in, then reached for the horn and let out a short blast. Nothing happened, and he was about to go over for a closer look when there was a movement in the dimness and a figure appeared. A minute later a man walked slowly out, staring at Moran with colorless eyes.

He was wearing a pair of oil-stained jeans and a gray janitor's shirt of the kind that could be ordered from any uniform company. About fifty, face weatherbeaten as was common hereabouts, hair graying and receding. On the shirt pocket a name was embroidered: Marty.

"How you doing?" Moran called out. "May need a little gas, I don't know." He slapped the car roof. "Got a busted gauge, shows a full tank all the time." He smiled at the attendant, traveling man being friendly: "Was driving it for a week after I bought it without filling up. Thought I was getting good mileage."

The man did no more than lower his head and nod before wordlessly walking to the pumps. Moran studied him as he lifted the nozzle. He was acting kind of strange, but that wasn't unheard of our here. Things did get depressing at times in the flatlands. Could be he was some kind of recluse. Maybe he liked living right next to an alien construct with absolutely no connection to anything else on the planet

He turned to the other buildings. From here the signs of abandonment were obvious: long grass in the yards. unwashed windows, paint peeling from the sides. He swung back to see the man slipping the nozzle into the tank. "Anybody else around?"

It was several seconds before an answer came: "Nope." Moran grinned to himself. A breakthrough. "Must get

a little lonely. The man rose, his face still emoty. He shrugged without looking up. Moran echoed the gesture and stepped

away from the car.

He went far enough to see the outpost rearing up over the prairie and regarded it silently. It was still pink, but it had changed shape and there were dark blotches near the top. "It bother you to be so close to that thing?"

There was no answer. He turned back to see the attendant staring at the gas nozzle as if it were the most important thing in the world. Moran turned again to the outpost. "It'd give me the creeps," he said. "Not that I got anything against those people, whatever they are." The thought crossed his mind of the Lesc dolls that had been such a big hit a couple Christmases ago, and he grimaced, "They've done some good things,"

Marty hadn't answered once-apparently he limited most of his conversation to shrugs. That didn't mean much: Moran had known cab drivers less talkative. But the atmosphere of the place disturbed him all the same -the houses, that unearthly shadow out there. Moran bit his lip. He didn't know what to look for, and he had no time. Not with what he'd left behind in Grand Forks.

There was a scrape of metal on metal, and he turned to see the nozzle lifted from the tank. The reek of gas struck him as he walked back. "Seventy-three cents," the attendant told him.

Moran smiled at him, "How you like that? I was partying in town last night, had a few too many cool ones. Must have filled her up and don't even remember it." Pulling out a roll of bills, he peeled off a single. "Don't bother to break it," he said as he handed it over.

Marty took it without a word and started to turn away. "Hey," Moran said. "How about checking the oil?" Halting, the man nodded, then swung around and brushed past him. Moran reached into the car and unlocked the hood. He waited until it was raised, then stepped forward.

The attendant had the dipstick out and was inspecting it with the same enthusiasm he'd shown about everything else. As Moran watched, he took a rag out of his back pocket and wiped it clean. "Full," he said in a low voice.

Moran eyed him a moment. He was about ready to hop in the car and get out of North Dakota. Let the Committee look into it . . . He turned to the door but then halted, seeing a woman's face: Angie's eyes glaring back at him as she'd left that last morning, the expression that read, "You'll remember this one, buster,"

Involuntarily, he shivered. He'd remembered, all right.

He swung back to the attendant. "You know," he said, trying to keep his voice level, "maybe I need an oil change. What do you think?"

Shrugging, Marty looked at him blankly.

"Okay, I'll go for it,"

Silently, the man turned to the office. "You want me to pull into one of the bays?" Moran called after him. He was answered with a curt shake of the head.

Biting his lip, Moran stared at the retreating back. A twelve-year-old would have known that oil was new. but that proved nothing. He clenched his fist and banged it on the hood. It had been no more than a hunch that had caused him to turn back here: that there was something wrong when a human being remained at a spot from which everyone else had fled, an area that had turned strange, a place where the grotesque was as common as daylight.

Maybe a glance at the office would tell him something. He walked around the car and paused, staring at the single line of windows across the bay doors. Eves narrowed, he approached them.

It was dark inside and the windows were covered with grit, but he could still see. In the first bay there was the dark bulk of a van, a Ford or a Honda, he couldn't make out which. He moved to the next, A compact sat in this one. He shaded his eyes and looked at an angle to figure out what it was. The hood ornament told him: a Beamer.

He stepped back, face slack. At that moment the attendant emerged, carrying a filter wrench and an oil pan. Moran watched as he went to the car and slid underneath it, then turned back to the doors

The van he could understand. You could find them on the moon. But a BMW, out here? The guy sure as hell wasn't making enough off this place to afford a fifty grand automobile. Oh, it was barely possible somebody was storing it here, but Moran didn't buy that. The attendant, the outpost, these empty cars—it was too much of a coincidence

He moved slowly to the car, hearing the glug of oil as it drained into the pan. The attendant wiggled from underneath and went to a rack next to the pumps. He picked up several cans and stepped to the front of the car, standing in silence until Moran realized what he was waiting for and went over to unlock the hood.

He wondered what he'd find in the houses if he went inside. All possessions intact, beds unmade, food rotted and dried on the tables? The Committee had a list of at least three thousand disappearances in the areas near the outposts. The FBI claimed they were simply people who'd fallen out of touch after moving away, a matter of records, they'd check it out . . .

He realized he was cracking his knuckles and stopped as the attendant slammed the hood shut. Moran stepped closer, eyes never leaving that blank face. "Buddy of mine says some weird things have been happening near these outposts," he said, arms tensing against the side

panel. "You hear anything like that?" Picking up the empty cans, the man moved off. "Don't watch much news out here," he said in that same flat tone.

"Wasn't on the news," Moran said. The attendant discarded the cans and turned back, mouth open to speak. Moran cut him off. "How about a new oil filter?"

For a minute Moran thought he was going to tell him to go to hell, at which point he would get in the car and drive off. But the attendant simply nodded and went to the office.

Moran rubbed the back of his head and paced the tarmac. He swung around on one leg, glanced unseeingly at the outpost, and was about to return to the car when something at the back of the building, past the restrooms, caught his eye.

Dropping his arm, he stared at it a moment. The tip of a car fender. He started walking toward it and was at a run when he reached the corner.

There were three of them: a Subaru, a beat-up Rabbit and a Blazer. Nearest to him was the Blazer. It had Kansas plates and was thick with dust. He ran a finger down the hood. It had been there for months. Through the window he could see a child's seat in the back.

He rubbed the dust between his fingers, recalling that night two years ago in Charleston: her car on the shoulder of the road that she drove to work every day. The vast glowing structure looming in the distance. The tracks in the damp earth leading in that direction—a woman's footprints, small and vulnerable. How he'd run to the outpost through the pouring rain, scrambling around it for hours, calling out her name, trying to get inside through whatever it was that had changed the air into a thick, gluey mass. . . .

He raised his eyes to the outpost. With a wordless nod he turned and walked out front.

The attendant was next to the car, holding a filter. "Hey," Moran called out. "There's something happening here." He gestured at the outpost. "I know these things are supposed to change, but I've never seen nothing like this."

The man raised his head. On his face was the first sign of emotion that Moran had seen, a kind of cold, remorseless expectancy. Dropping the filter, he walked over. "Yes," he said, a thin smile appearing on his lips. "Yes." He turned his head to the outpost as soon as it came into sight, his face losing any trace of humanity. Moran backed off a step as he came to a halt. "Look."

Moran stared at him, jaw working, "Yeah, look." He raised his arm, then made a noise deep in his throat and let it fall. The attendant gave no sign that he'd noticed. "My wife . . ." Moran snarled and spat in the man's face. He didn't even flinch.

Moran turned on his heel and went to the car. "Look." he muttered as he flung the passenger door wide and yanked open the glove compartment, scattering maps as he grasped the gun. The single used cartridge from that morning fell to the floor, but he ignored it.

"Look." He pulled off the silencer. He wouldn't need it, not out here. He walked stiff-legged to the figure and raised the pis-

tol, aiming at the precise spot behind the ear. "Look!"

The sharp crack startled him; he hadn't fired without a silencer since he'd been trained.

The man fell like a sack, like something that had not been alive at all. The exec back in Grand Forks had wept after Moran hit him in the throat to keep him from calling out, as he'd watched him take the pistol from under his coat and tried to croak out the words to stop him from using it. He hadn't felt this rage then, cleansing and pure, the way it had been with the first two hits. He stared down at the body, almost thankful.

He jerked his head up sharply. The outpost loomed in the distance. As he watched it changed, jumping to a new and stranger shape. He raised the pistol skyward, squeezing the grip until it hurt. "You know," he whispered, his voice harsh. "Yes, you do."

Sticking the pistol in his belt, he grabbed the body under the arms. He dragged it across the concrete to the office door and inside. The place was a mess: food, trash, old clothing scattered all over, and it stank. He half-carried the corpse through the room, knocking over a full wastebasket, and on into the bay, where he braced it against the BMW. He took off the gas cap and sniffed. A pile of oily rags lay in the corner. He tore them into strips and tied them loosely together, then fed one end into the gas tank. Trailing the other to the office he fumbled for his lighter and lit the rags. He waited a minute to make sure they'd caught before running to the car.

Once there he stopped to inspect the road again then got in, tossing the gun on the seat. He started up, gunning the engine; he had one more reason to get out of the state pronto.

Pressure, persuasion . . . assassination. He wondered what the exec had done. Probably the same as all the others, some kind of deal, an arrangement to build some precious alien machine without questioning the fact that the Lesc had asked for nothing more than to oversee the manufacturing plants, where they'd be in contact with hundreds who would change, and grow distant, and become whatever it was the Lesc wanted them to be.

The Committee wouldn't be happy about two hits in the same area, but the word that the Lesc were luring people in would make up for it. That was new, that hadn't been necessary before the areas around the outposts had been abandoned. One more item for the files, another tactic in the quiet war.

There was a dull sound behind him. He looked in the mirror to see a thin pall of smoke beginning to rise. He pressed harder on the accelerator.

The outpost was dropping beneath the horizon. It

seemed to flicker once more, but that might have been a trick of vision. He felt an urge to go back, to make his way to that shape, to confront them once and for all, to end it. But he pushed it back into bollowness, back where the rage lived. It would come. He would see to it. Someday, when he was ready...

He bent forward to contemplate the flat miles ahead. When he looked behind him there was nothing in sight except a dense pillar of smoke reaching skyward, black and curling in the afternoon sun. •

Behind

Robert A. Metzger

I'm sorry.
It's the little things that get you.

Always the little things. I should know, and soon,

so will you. I'm sorry.

So, so sorry. I'm Major League sorry. I'm the World Series of sorry. But I'm not so sorry that I'll stop, that I'll keep from dragging you down, that I'll not reach out from this page, insert my paper-thin fingers through your thick skull, and then tug and poke at the pink stuff I find inside until I pull you *Behind*.

Oh, no.

I'm not so sorry that I won't try to pull you Bebind.

Because I want out I want out bad. I remember. I can do nothing but remember. Outside is the sun beating-against the side of your face, burning you, cooking you, splotching your skin with wondrous wrinkles and precancerous tumors. Outside is sand grinding between your toes and smog etching your eyeballs. Outside tastes like the back of postage stamps and smells like peppermint toothpaste and burnt onion rings.

I'm taking no chances.

You might actually be the one. You may be the key, my every own handcrafted, blood-and-bone talisman that might get me out from Bebind. I'm not noble. I'm not self-sacrificing. That's only for those Outside. When you're Behind, all that matters is getting out.

That's all.

That's all

I was cheated, I was tricked, and now it's your turn. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, an existence for an existence. That's become my motto, my credo. I'd tattoo it on my forehead if I could. I'd use bright red ink and drive it in deep with a buzzing needle.

Buzz.

Buzz.

But there are no tattoos Behind. And that's because here there's nothing to drive that red ink into. There are no arms, no butts, no shoulder blades, and certainly no foreheads.

There's nothing Behind.

Nothing but me.

And I want out.

There's a symmetry to lit, there always is. You sit out there, staring down at this page, at these words, at these letters. You are Outside, looking in, staring into my head, into my dreams. But I'm trapped in the Behind, looking out, staring into your ugly face, watching you bite at the corner of your lower lip, pull at your left eyebrow and run your fingers through your greasy hair. You pick your nose, suck on your teeth and pop those pimples.

I see you.

I see you now.

You look up, you look down. You see the words. You read the words. I watch your eyes scan left to right.

They're scanning now.

I make them scan.

I do

I do.

I do

I just made you drag them down this page, jerked them to the very end of this sentence. The end. The end. The end. The end. The end. I dare you to look away, to turn to another story, to never again look at this page.

Do it!

Look away!

Hal

You tried. I could see it in your face, the annoyance, the disgust, the what-in-the-hell-is-this-guy-rambling-about look. But you couldn't look away.

It's too late for you now, because it's the little things that sat you down the garden path, the little things that so permanently destroy and maim. Your mistake, your misfortune, was to open to this story, to read those first two words.

 $Im\ sorry.$

Sucker!

Now I have you.

Just the same way that *be* got me.

It was a little thing.

It was a mirror—a very little mirror.

The sign read: Mirror Man

o It was written on a piece of cardboard—a dog-eared, bent, ugly little scrap that was taped to his forehead, held there by flapping pieces of black electrical tape.

I saw this out of the corner of my eye.

* was a little thing, an insignificant thing.

But I saw it.

And that was all that mattered.

It's all that ever matters.

I had been standing in line, waiting to order, in dire need of another piece of McFood, one more cholesterolladen tidbit to further the transformation of my arteries into lard-choked worms

"What will it McBe?" she cheerfully asked.

I wasn't looking at her, really didn't hear her. It was the Mirror Man that I was focused on. I stared at the short, scruffy little guy wearing jeans that were more holes and oil stains than denim, a tee-shirt that probably had not been Bizzed since a Democrat sat in the Oval Office, an idiot's grin full of dark, shattered stumplike teeth, and a sliver of mirror that was somehow glued to the end of his sun-scarred nose.

It was a weird piece of mirror.

It was not square or rectangular, but ragged, somehow made up of far too many sides. But it was not just some broken shard of mirror. No. It had been carefully cut, purposely crafted, each angle, each line, each twist and turn of its perimeter constructed just right.

I knew this.

I simply knew it.

I left the line without ordering food, shoved and elbowed my way past the others who were in line, and then walked over toward the door to where the Mirror Man leaned against the McTrashcan.

I should not have gone over.

I should have simply kept walking, moved right through those doors and never looked back, never thought again

about that mirror glued to the end of his nose.

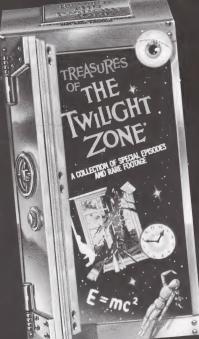
I should have.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

And you know why. There are times when you simply can't look away. You're on the freeway, and that chunk of red meat not quite under the blood-stained

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SUNCOAST MOTION PICTURE COMPANY blanket was the guy on the motorcycle that had passed you about twenty miles back, going twice your speed. You look. You have to look. You always look. Sumbling drunks make you look. People talking to themselves make you look. Forty-two-inch asses stuffed into thirty-six-inch lears make you look.

And I make you look. You're still reading. You think I'm crazy.

So you look.

You have to look. So you read this word, and the next word, and then the word after that. You can't look away, and neither could I.

So I stood there, staring into his mirrored nose, seeing nothing except for my own reflection, my own stupid, wide-eyed, slack-jawed, it's-amazing-that-you-caneven-dress-vourself face.

"Have you ever wondered?" asked the Mirror Man. I've probably wondered more than most. But it never did me any good. I'd been trying for many a year to break myself of that habit. But I'd never quite managed it. Wondering had never done me any good. All it ever did was get me in trouble. You know what I'm talking about. You know perfectly well. Wondering is getting you in trouble right now.

"What's Behind a mirror?" he asked.

I looked into his mirror. I was behind his mirror. I was in there, staring out at myself, staring at my confused, simple minded looking face: But I knew it was only an illusion. I was no dummy. I knew the score. Light goes in, gets bent and twisted, does some bumping and grinding, and then presto, it pops back out. I knew that. I was a product of the best public schools this nation offered.

"There's nothing behind a mirror," I said confidently.

The mirror streaked back and forth, my own reflection shifting and distorting as he shook his head.

"Wrong," he said. "There is something Behind everybring. I once thought just like you, that everything is simply as it appears, that there is nothing Behind, but I learned my lesson, learned the truth. I met this old woman with no ears, who smelled like mildew and rotting cabbage. She wore aluminum foil around her head, saying that it kept out bad thoughts, and pushed a shopping basket full of tarnished and dented trombones. I was going to give her a quarter, but she didn't want money. All she wanted was for me to listen to her music, to listen to what was Behind her music,

His noise twitched.

My reflection danced.

"Mistake," he said. "I should have cut off my ears, poured boiling lead into the earholes, and then driven a dulled ice pick right through my head. That would have been the prudent path, the safe path. But I made a mistake. I was cutious. I was wondering. I simply stood there as she stuffed the tarnished end of one of those trombones into her wrinkled old mouth and filled her wrinkled old cheeks with air. The first note was an earshattering explosion, a piercing vibration that cut right through my head, a wail that seemed to fill the street with mirrored snowflakes. I could no longer see her,

could see nothing at all except for silvered reflections of myself, a thousand shattered and bent reflections of myself. But I could hear the music, a song filled with the screech of rusted hinges and the yowl of cats in heat. As I stared into all those reflections that were me, I listened, and then I heard something else, something Bebind the roaning screech."

I knew right then and there that this guy had been bent, folded and mutilated. I had no idea why I was standing there and listening to this. I should have gotten back in line. But I didn't move. This guy was simply too reminiscent of a pile of meat trying to hide beneath a bloody blanket.

"It was a different type of music," said the Mirror Man. "It was something filled with notes that could not be heard, but only felt, notes that vibrated in the soles of your feet and rattled your back molars. It was music that sunk its mirrored teeth into my neck, music that started to drag me Behind all the mirrors. The old woman screamed at me, told me to fight it, and begged me to release her from ber Behind, to not fall into my own Behind, I didn't understand, I didn't want to understand, I managed to turn, managed to see past the mirrors, and even managed to run away. But it didn't matter, didn't make any difference at all. I'd seen the Behind, and it had seen me. That's how it started. I ran away from the old woman, but it was too late. The world was full of reflections. I saw them in the tears that ran down my wife's face, in the dead black screen of my TV, in the shiny chrome bumper of my new car, and even in the glistening crystal of my Rolex.'

I desperately wanted to walk away now, actually run away, but my feet seemed stuck to the floor.

away, but my tere seemed stuce to the floor.

"I tried to fight it, tried not to let it pull me into the Behind," said the Mirror Man, "but I wasn't strong enough. No one is strong enough. I'd seen the Behind, and it had pulled me down. And now I live here, live in a place of reflections and cold light, trapped Behind glass, unable to touch or be touched, trapped apart and alone. And I know there's only one way out, one way of escape. I have to bring someone else here, bring someone into my Behind, so that they can take my place."

I looked at this guy, at the mirror glued to his nose, and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was insane, flat-out get-the-white-coat-and-toss-him-into-the-

rubber-room type of insane.

"She tricked me. She trapped me. She made me go Behind by listening to her music" he screamed. "Her music opened me up, showed me things that shouldn't be seen. I was taken Behind. And now I'm trapped, with only one way out. You have to take my place." He suddenly hopped up and down, and his neck spamed, causing his head to twitch from side to side. "Please don't be like all the others," he begged. "Don't go into your own Behind. Come into my Behind!

I could feel eyes suddenly turning toward me, staring at the back of my head, those eyes that only wanted to see McTatoes and McCrabs but were now forced to watch the back of my head.

"I want out!" he screamed.

I stepped back.

He reached out for me, reached out with a dirty, grimy, oil-stained hand. He tried to grab my shoulder, trying to pull me toward him.

But the hand was no longer a hand.

It had become paper-thin, actually having turned into a picture of a hand, a thing that was flat and two-dimensional, a thing attached to the end of his wrist with electrical tape.

It wasn't real.

It was a photograph.

But the fingers moved, actually fluttered. I turned.

I ran.

"You're slipping Behind!" he screamed. "You looked into my mirror and you saw the Behind, just the same way that I listened to her music and saw the Behind, Release me! Don't slip into your own Behind. Release me!"

Behind.

I managed to get home, managed not to drive through cars that had become flat and two-dimensional, cars that were only photographs of cars, cars that seemed to disappear whenever they turned right or left. I rolled up into the driveway, but could not get out of the car, could not touch the door release, could not get my fingers around the shiny chrome lever that had somehow sunk itself into the door. I crawled through the window, and then the car itself was gone.

I was standing Behind it.

There was nothing there except for the outline of a car, and within that outline, there was nothing but haze, a gray-white type of haze that looked like smog. I could smell the hot rubber from the tires, the stink of gasoline, and even hear the tink-tink of the cooling engine. But the car itself was gone.

Only the outline remained.

And then I turned my head.

And even the outline vanished, I was looking at the car edge on. It no longer existed.

I ran to my house, up the stairs that were no longer up, but somehow all flat, without height or depth. I wanted to be inside my house, sitting on my couch, listening to the stereo, munching on popcorn, sucking on a beer, staring at the TV, probing for lint in my belly button, tossing my socks onto the floor, burping, clicking the channel changer, and reading the sports page.

I wanted in.

I wanted my things.

I made a grab for the doorknob.

And I missed.

I banged at the door, ran my hands across it, and could feel nothing except for what felt like cool, stiff paper. There were no contours, no texture, no feeling of wood, glass or brass. It was made of paper.

It was flat

I leapt at the front door, shoulder first, somehow be-

lieving that if I could break that door down, that my living room would be Behind it, that all the things that made up my life would be Behind it.

I hit the door. Paper ripped.

And I fell through.

I fell Rehind

Gray-white smoke swallowed me.

I don't know how long I've been here, how long I've been Behind. Time means nothing here; it is just one more lost dimension. This is a place of smoke and light, a place of shadows and images.

And it is the images that I focus on.

They are mostly images of eyes, of twitching, scanning eyes, of eyes that read this page, of eyes that scan left to right and top to bottom.

Those eyes are my only way out, my only hope.

They are your eyes.

I write my words, flat and dreary words, begging words, in the wispy smoke that fills this Behind place, that fills my Behind place, hoping that you will see them, and through them see what lies Behind, I want you to look past the words, past this page, past all the things that you've ever seen. I want out from Behind.

I want you to get me out.

And I feel there might just be a chance this time.

You've read this far, you've been pulled into this, seen something of the Behind. When you look up from this page, I know what you'll do. I know what you'll have to do. You'll begin to look for things that aren't quite there, seeing things that you've never seen before, things that you've never dreamed of before.

The Behind has touched you.

I know it.

I can see it in your eyes.

When you finish this story, you'll turn the page, turn that thin, flimsy piece of paper, and look at the other side.

You'll hope to see another story.

You'll hope to see more inky words.

But you won't.

You'll see something that shouldn't be there.

You'll see my eyes, my mirrored eyes, staring out from Behind the page. I know you know. You'll try not to turn to the next page, try not to see what may be Behind.

But you'll have to.

I've reached into your head, scrambled that gooey stuff within, and changed you. I'm changing you even right now. Your eyes continue to scan left to right. You keep reading, you keep looking.

I have you.

I want you to turn this page.

I want you to come into my Behind.

Do it now!

Turn the page!

Behind

Robert A. Metzger

In sorry.

It's the little things that get you.

Always the little things.

I should know, and soon, ow ill you.

So, so sorry. I'm Major.

So, so sorry. I'm Major.

League sorry. I'm the World

Series of sorry. But I'm no so

League sorry. I'm the World
Series of sorry. But I'm not so
sorry that I'll stop, that I'll keep
from dragging you down, that
I'll not reach out from this page,
insert my paper-thin fingers

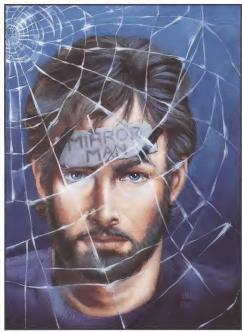


Illustration by Jrll Bauman

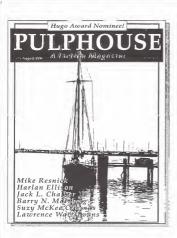
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Three-Body Problem



A. L. Sirois

"I'm going to miss that tinker toy," said Dr. Lori Weyler, watching the image of the Orbital Development Company's facility dwindle in her monitor. She wore a blue ODCO jumpsuit that complemented her red hair. "Even if the coffee maker did spray the lab with Mountain Blend every week or so."

Commander Carole Praeger's stomach lurched. "Sounds tasty," she said. She tapped course corrections into the Argus's computer and smiled wanly at the materials scientist.

Lori grunted. "I wish I knew what was so damn important for Synertech to want me back

on Earth five weeks early."

"Sorry—I just drive the cab,"
Carole said. A call light blinked
on the microshuttle's radio.

"Calling Argus." It was the voice of Barye Davidoff, from ground control in New Mexico.

Illustration by Guy Frechette

"Argus aye. Hello, Bear, come back?"

"Everything okay up there, Carrie?"

Carole blinked. He wasn't picking up on their usual CB banter, and his voice was tense, strained. Why-?

Ob. God, this is it/ she thought. The knot twisting in her stomach for the last two weeks tightened. They've found out. Damn medical telemetry. TranSolar's space medic, Robert Lasher, was obviously having Bear call

Carole closed her eyes. "Bear, tell Lasher I'll get back to him." "Huh? What's the doc got to do with anything?"

She opened her eyes. "Doesn't he want to talk to me?" "No-why? Are you having a problem?"

"No." Relief flooded her. Out of the corner of her eve. Carole noticed Lori watching. Whoa, almost put my foot right in it. She sat up a little straighter. "What can we do you for, Bear?"

"How would you like to take a little excursion?" Lori and Carole exchanged puzzled looks, Carole said.

"I don't get you." "Okav-three months ago TranSolar put up a satellite

to inventory orbital debris, with me in charge of the console jockeys."

"I know that," said Carole. "So what?"

"Dr Weyler doesn't know it," said Davidoff. "Let me explain. Anyway, some weird data started coming in, detailing an object with an odd magnetic signature. Dr. Weyler, would you have a look at the info? I've uploaded it into your computer."

Carole called up the files as Lori watched. Figures and

diagrams began filling the screen. "You sure this isn't just some old booster or somebody's

satellite fairing that came loose?" Carole asked, "Look at the orbital calculations." Bear said.

"Yeah, well-pretty stable for flotsam."

"Right. We checked NORAD, and they had no record

of it. "These magnetic flux readings," said Lori. "Peculiar . . .

like a ceramic, almost.' "I'm thinking it's Chinese," said Bear, "They didn't get

that station of theirs, the Laoving, up without a dry run." "Well, maybe," Lori murmured "Shouldn't someone take a look?" Carole said before

the import of her words hit her. "Oh . . . I get you." "Here's the deal." Davidoff's voice became confiden-

tial. "Dr Weyler, Synertech would really like you to look at that thing. But the only way you will is with TranSolar's help. Carrie, before you say anything, I know you have the fuel margin-I've gotten a status update of Argus from ODCO's computer, '

"My boss is eating five weeks of muy expensivo lab time," said Lori thoughtfully. "What's the big goddamn hurry?"

"Wait," Carole said. She pointed at the screen. "Look here—that orbit isn't so stable that it doesn't decay a little. every go-round. We're entering a period of increased solar activity. The first big flare that spurts up will excite the atmosphere. It'll expand and our bogey'll start dragging air.'

"Exactly," said Bear. "We think a month, max."

"How come no one told me about this before?" Carole asked

"Yeah, Carrie, I'm sorry about that," said Bear. Carole heard the frustration in his voice and knew what he was going to say. "I had to wait for authorization from Swigert. You know how it is."

Who? Lori mouthed.

"Our CEO," Carole muttered. To Davidoff she said, "I copy you. Bear, We better get going. Got some course change figures for me?"

After the math was uploaded from Earth, Bear signed off. "So," said Lori, settling into the copilot's seat, "what's it been, two years since we've seen each other? You're

looking good, Blondie.' Carole smiled at the old nickname. "Are you still run-

ning those marathons?" Lori wrinkled her nose, "Popped a tendon eight months

back. Nowadays I bike. Hey, how's that hippie sister of "Rowan? She's fine. You still look more like her than

I do. When'd you start growing your hair?" Lori seemed to settle into herself. "After Harry-after

Atlantis," she said quietly.

"Oh," said Carole. Like Lori, she'd been working for NASA in the mid-1990's.

NASA had been exciting then, with the agency struggling with competition from commercial launch providers. After cost overruns killed Freedom, a consortium of aggressive young companies leased the MIR station from the Russian Commonwealth, intending to refit it. NASA had won the contract to transport the first crew there.

Carole had been slated to copilot the orbiter, but was grounded by flu. Cursing her luck and blowing her nose, she watched the mission on commercial TV. As the two vehicles connected, a faulty seal in MIR's umbilical tunnel gave way. Backup systems failed-Atlantis decompressed. Along with more than 2.5 billion other people, Carole watched her crewmates, including Lori Weyler's fiance, Commander Harold Goldes, strangling until the networks cut the satellite feed.

NASA promptly cancelled all further STS missions. The shuttle program had been under fire on Capitol Hill; now it was finished. Many astronauts, including Carole and Lori, guit the agency for positions in the private sector.

"So what's this hoo-ha about a doctor?" Lori asked.

"Not to change the subject." "Aah, you know," Carole said, with a wry smile. "Fve

been a little . . . " She twiddled her fingers. "Oh, motion sickness," said Lori, solicitous. "Bummer," Carole spread her palms and shrugged. "Curse of the

spaceways," she said.

"No shitski. You'll let me know if I can do anything." "Uh-huh. Listen, have you been working for Synertech the whole time since you left NASA?"

"A-yup," said Lori. "The pushy little Jew beat out half a dozen men for the position." She grinned.

They chatted a bit longer, then Lori excused herself and went aft for a nap in the crew closet. Carole selected a Charles Mingus CD, slid it into the slot, and sat back in her acceleration couch. Amazingly, she now had an hour to herself. She couldn't remember the last time that had happened. There was time to think, but really only one thing to think about. She thought about it so deeply that before she knew it, she heard Lori cursing while strugeling to do her clothes.

"Nothing like a little catnap," said Lori, floating into the command section. "We've got what, three hours till rendezvous? I'll watch the lights if you want to snooze."

"Thanks," said Carole, eyeing the clock. "Wake me in two, okay?"

Back in the crew compartment, she webbed herself in and closed her eyes. She fell asleep almost at once. Dreaming:

It was a place of dust and dirt and clinging webs. Her bands disturbed sowbugs as she scrabbled through the litter. Thin strips of light squeezed through slats to ber left, making hot little diamonds on the dirt under the porch. I won't go, she thought as she crauled. I won't They can't make me do it. I won't go!

"Carrie?" It was Rowan calling, her elder sister, in a voice thick from crying. "Carrie? We gotta go now."

No! Carrie shouted.

Her eyes snapped open. Rowan's face hung over her like a ghost.

"Hev-vou okav?"

Carole blinked. Not Rowan, Lori looked a little like Rowan, with that curly red hair and wide mouth, but her robust voice was nothing like Rowan's soft contralto.

"Yeah." Carole took a shaky breath. "Just a nightmare." Her stomach lurched. She was going to be sick. "Excuse me!" She grabbed for a vomit bag and retched up her supper of concentrates.

Lori drifted back, trying to hide her disgust. Carole looked up. Wiping her mouth, she sealed the

bag and disposed of it. "Space sick," she said weakly to Lori.

"Right," said Lori. Her eyes glittered. "Space sick, Like,

every morning?"

Carole refused to meet Lori's stare. This is why I had that dream, she thought. Because I want to be rid of this damn . . . problem. It's guilt.

Lori touched her shoulder. "Look, Γ m sorry. Γ ll get some breakfast."

"Thanks," Carole said.

Lori paused at the door. "If you want to talk about anything, you let me know," she said, then vanished into the galley.

Carole dressed and went to the command deck. There she watched Lori on the galley monitor. Lori swam about with rapid ease, using her feet to keep herself in position and even hold utensils. Her long, virtually prehensile toes made Carole wonder if Lori might represent the first step on the evolutionary ladder to Homo outerspaciens.

The beginning of new life. Something bubbled inside her. New life, indeed.

It had to have happened in Bermuda with Glenn, nine

weeks ago at the Pompano Beach Club. She smiled at the thought of fit watching the sun set over that fabulous turquoise ocean while drinking dark-and-stormies in the jacuzzi. Colonel Glenn Delaney, Navy fighter pilot, had a Boston Brahmin's social and athletic ease on the dance floor, on the tennis court—and in bed. If she told him she was pregnant, he'd say, "We're a

class act, Carrie. Let's do marriage."

Minus the baby angle, she might have agreed. They were genuinely fond of each other, and their careers brought in plenty of money. They'd work hard and vacation well.

The truth was she didn't want a child.

Then why didn't you have your tubes tled instead of relying on a contraceptive that failed? Guilt stabbed through her. She knew what her mother would say: her mother, who had given up a career for her babies. Her mother, whose health had been ruined by her last pregnancy.

She pushed the guilt away. NASA's doing this Mars

mission with the Russians, she thought. My resume's good, I've got as much chance as anyone. There is no room in my life for a baby.

Lori floated into the command section just ahead of an appetizing odor.

Carole sniffed. "What's that?"

"Quiche Lori. Powdered eggs, water, cheese food I carry a supply of herbs. Oregano, basil. I pride myself on taking these damn cookers beyond their specs. Want a bite?"

"Maybe so."

Before the meal was complete the Argus's instruments had picked up their target.

"Thing's bigger than we thought," Carole said, swallowing the last morsel of egg. "We're ten klicks out, and I have a visual—but the radar trace thinks it's smaller." Lori stared at the object taking definition on her screen.

"Irregularly shaped," she said. "Maybe from an explosion. Sure, it fits. China lofts the thing, there's a problem, they cover it up. Did a good job, because it certainly never made the news."
"Uh-huh. Rotating around the long axis at, what, about

half an rpm?"

"Yeah," said Lori tightly. "No sunflashes; matte finish?" "Strap in. I'm going to use the verniers."

Carole brought the microshuttle around for a broad-⁴ side view of the object. She looked out the window to port—and felt the hairs begin rising on her arms.

"Holy Mama Moses," she said softly.
"Say what?" asked Lori. Then she saw the other craft.

"What the hell?"

Carole fumbled with the radio control clipped to her

belt, switching it to voice-activated mode.

"Bear," she began, and swallowed. "Barye!"
"Argus aye," came the familiar voice from New Mexi-

co. "What's up, Carrie?"

"This is a very odd-looking Chinese industrial experi-

ment!"
"Copy," said Davidoff. "Can you get your minicam

rolling?"

"Roger that," Carole said, baring her teeth at Lori. She noticed her breathing: shallow, rapid. She reached for the small TV camera near the window.

"Oh-kaaaay," she said. "Let me get it angled in the bracket. . . . Right. See it?"

"No, we—yes, Commander, we see it now. God!" The background babble increased as the other console operators on the ground began getting the video signal. "Hold it down!" Davidoff said off-mike. The voices faded slightly. Then, to Carole: "Can you detail it"

"Uhm—it's big as a house . . . twisted, like DNA coiled on itself. Long blobby spines sticking out every which way . . . sensor arrays. maybe."

*Definitely a ceramic," said Lori, "composited with some polymers, otherwise it would have been picked up by Earth-based radar. Sure don't look Chinese to mot!"

Too many people were talking on the comm link. Carole raised her volume. "Bear? I need instructions." "Agh! Turn down the gain and sit tight, Commander,

while I make some calls."

"And you'll get Synertech's CEO on the line while you're

at it," Lori said meaningfully.

"She's already on-site," said Bear.

"That's his 'serious and constructive' voice," Carole murmured to Lori. "Must be TranSolar brass lurking

about."

"What a surprise that would be." said Lori.

"Here she comes, with Mr. Swigert," Davidoff said.

Lori leaned close to Carole. "Tell me about this guy," she whispered.

"Bottom-line bureaucrat," Carole whispered back.

"Clever, but too image-conscious for me."

"Argus, stand by," said Davidoff. The audio cut out.
"That probably means your boss and mine are debating what we should do," Lori said. "Remote management.
God, that's exasperating. We've got to be in a better decision-making position than they are."

The radio came to life again. "Carole," Davidoff said, "we've just called the US and Commonwealth defense authorities, and ESA. No one admits to lofting anything clandestine."

Carole scratched her head. "And Japan publicizes everything, even their failures," she said. "Who's that leave?"

"Right," said Davidoff. "Best guess: as I said, a Chinese experiment. Anything on your radio?"

"Nothing, it's a deadster," Carole said.

"dryus, sorry—please stand by again." The signal from Earth died away. It came back a minute or so later. "We just got an interesting call," Davidoff said slowly. "From the Chinese. They've noticed your deviation from your filed flight plan. I didn't think they monitored us that closely—well, never mind. They're sending the Fou lin, one of their supply shuttles, over from the Laoying with some, ah, advisors."

"The 'ying isn't manned yet, I thought," said Carole.

"Advisors, my ass," said Lori. "Those are construction

team goons." She tapped her fingers on the console.
"Did you ask 'em if this is one of their discards?"

"Yes," said Davidoff, in a different tone. "They wouldn't say yea or nay. As far as I'm concerned, that just means they don't want to admit they screwed up." He cleared his throat. "You can expect them by 0500."

Less than six hours. Carole felt a pit open in her belly, "Well, we've got salvage rights, don't we?"

"Commander Praeger?" A new voice boomed from the speakers. She recognized it as Transolar's president, Ted Swigert. "You're to do nothing, repeat, nothing to jeopardize the safety of either yourself or Dr. Weyler. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir, I copy," she said, glancing at Lori.

After Bear signed off, Carole put Argus into a matching tumble, making the two craft motionless relative to one another. The maneuver imparted about one-twelfth of a G to the "polar" regions of the microshuttle. Carole watched an unsecured pen settle to the floor beside her. Amidships, the sleeping quarters would still be a micrograve environment.

"We should try to sleep," Carole said thoughtfully.
"It's ship's midnight. We'll need our wits when the Chinese get here."

"You sleep if you want," said Lori.

"And what are you going to be doing?" Carole asked, rubbing her fingers together.

"Trying to figure how to get in before our guests arrive." Carole shook her head. "You heard Swigert. No risks. We're staying put."

"Like I said before, we're in a better decision-making posture than our bosses."

"Lori, the damn thing belongs to the Chinese."

"Yeah? They haven't claimed it."

"There isn't anyone else's it could be."

"Well, I—"

There was nothing suble about what happened next. Everything around Carole—the ship, the chair in which she sat, Lori—disappeared, and she was hurding through space. A pocked moon, filling a third of the sky, toomed vertiginously ahead. Before Carole could even gasp, it flashed by. Beyond, a bigger object—a planet, a maroon globe unfamiliar to her—similarly expanded and vanished, then another, like a movie running at high speed. Jesus Highorolling Orbit? Carole thought, terrified.

From behind her, the organic shape of the Chinese vehicle flew by into the emptiness—and the movie speeded up to follow, keeping the object in sight as it fled into the dark.

In the all but featureless void, she had a few moments to let her pilot's training take over. Evaluate the situation, she told herself. I can feel the couch and my clothes, but I can't see them, can't smell, can't hear anything!

It's a souped-up virtual reality, she thought, recalling training sessions in simulators. With no headest, nothing! This is being broadcast from that thing outside. It's communication! Her flesh crawled. She gripped the couch so tightly her hands ached. The scene flickered, then steadled. She was approaching a spherical object, something translucent. Within, movement. A vehicle of some kind? No—somehow she knew it was alive. Her mind gibbered about the scale—in space there was no reference. She watched helplessly while structures contracted and quivered throughout the leplikie volume of the thing.

The scene melted away, replaced by another. Her disembodied viewpoint skimmed the blasted surface of what had apparently been a fruitful world. Cities lay in ruins, agricultural regions were stripped raw, lakes and oceans simmered with pollution. Enormous industrial complexes clutched at the land. Carole approached one. Pools of bubbling effluvia surrounded ovoid structures. Carole passed through the wall of one ovoid and found herself in an enormous ribbed chamber lit by glowing ribbons strung along the walls. Below, insectile forms labored unceasingly at incomprehensible apparatus. Occasionally one of the beings collapsed. Other workers instantly set upon it and tore it to pieces. After devouring it, they continued working.

From deep within herself, Carole felt a growing sense of dumb, urgent greed. With a shock she realized the sensation wasn't hers—somehow she was receiving it from the communication. The damn thing's telepathic, she thought. There's something alive in there! Her stomach churned.

Abruptly she was back in the shuttle. The clock still read a few moments shy of midnight. Lori goggled at her.

"You too?" Carole whispered, gripping the handrests of her acceleration chair.

Lori, mouth agape, nodded slowly.

Carole took a deep shuddering breath. "It's not Chinese." "Y-yeah," said Lori. "We ought to try to get inside it." "What?" Carole stared at her. "Those weren't benign images! If anything's alive in there, it's foul!"

"That won't stop our Chinese advisors," said Lori.
"Wait," said Carole, "Let's reconstruct, I saw—we saw.

right?—what might be a mission log recording. Maybe. What do you suppose that big round thing was?"
"A starfaring jellyfish—how the hell would I know? Maybe the answer's inside our buddy out there."

"Maybe it isn't," said Carole. "Just the way things are, Lori, this is the discovery of, well, of the century. It's proof there's intelligent life elsewhere in the universe!"

"Some proof!" Lori was, Carole saw, breathing heavily. So am I. "I'm calling this in," Carole said, controlling herself. "We need help."

But static blanketed every channel on the radio. "Nothing's getting through either way!" Carole slumped back in her seat. "I didn't expect a solar flare so soon."

"It's not a flare." Lori was looking out the window.

Carole scowled. "What do you mean?"

"Our friend is jamming us."

"Oh, come on, you-"

"You know it is," Lori said, turning to look at her.
"That's nuts—it's really crazy." Carole knew she didn't sound very convincing.

"You know what?" asked Lori, unstrapping herself from her couch. "You're afraid. Well, I am, too, but I'm not going to let it stop me."

"Nothing's stopping me!" Carole felt her anger rise. "Nothing?" Lori paused. "Not even your baby?"

Again Carole's world cracked open, but this time the shock came from within. A consuming rage clawed at her last shreds of control.

"Oh, don't give me that idiotic slack-jaw stuff," said Lori. "I'm not stupid. You ralph every morning—I saw it in your eyes when we talked about it. You're pregnant."

"If I am or not, what difference does it make? I'm going to do an EVA. I'll go see what I can do about maybe rigging an antenna—"

"If you go out there, you're endangering your baby."
"A clump of cells isn't—hey, it's none of your damn
business!" Carole stared at Lori, fighting an impulse to
seize her by the throat.

"It is if it impairs your performance," said Lori coldly. "My fine white butt is up here right next to yours, and I don't have any hormones clouding my judgment."

"Clouding my—wait, I get it; you're out to carve a slice of glory for yourself," Carole said. A sort of joyous lunacy loomed over her. She ached to give in to it.

Lori pulled a ballpoint pen from a pocket of her overalls and held it before her like a knife. Her eyes narrowed in hatred.

This isn't right, Carole thought, quivering on the brink of violence. "That thing, whatever's out there," she croaked. "Lori—it's getting into our minds. You can't talk about endangering a baby one second and want to kill me the next!"

Lori paused. A look of confusion crossed her face, but she retained her grip on the pen.

"It's fine-tuning on us," Carole said, unable to take her eyes off Lori's white-knuckled hand. "Listen: all it could do at first was send images. Then, right at the end of the log, we got that horrible, greedy hunger. By that time maybe it had our remotions figured out. Now it's working with them."

"Are you saying it's controlling us?" Lori asked, incredulous.

"Trying to, maybe," said Carole, staring at Lori's hand gripping the pen. "If it is, what'll happen when the Chinese get here? Will it make us try to kill them? Or will it decide the odds are better using them to kill us?"

Lori, white-faced, slowly slid the pen back into her pocket. "Maybe you're right," she said thickly. "I wanted to stab you, hurt you."

Carole nodded quickly, biting her lips, struggling to get her own rage under control. She forced herself to think. "Anyway, it's stopped, for now," she said.

"What do we do?" Lori's voice was high and tense.

"I don't know!" Carole took a deep breath. "Sorry—I don't mean to yell. I think we do have to get in before the Chinese do. But I'm the one to go. This is TranSolar's show."

"Look, uh, Carrie . . ." Lori said softly, "I'm sorry for what I said. You know—about the baby. I know you won't let it affect you. But suppose something happens?"

Carole stared at her. "Then it might be a good idea to get away before our pals from the *Laoying* show up. The Bear can talk you through re-entry. It's not hard."

"Yeah? Well, how about being real careful so I don't

have to try it?"

"Okay, your suit camera's looking good. Now let's hear your numbers," said Lori from the flight deck. The short-

range suit frequencies weren't being jammed, which made both women even more uneasy

"Time EVA is zero four," said Carole, floating out of the airlock into the vacuum. "Oh-Two is ninety-eight percent. Four-point-three suit pressure. . . . " And on through the rest of the readings she had made so many times before.

The alien, motionless against the careen of Earth and sun, looked odder the closer she got to it. Even its color was bizarre; vellowish grav with pale orange highlights.

She came to a halt less than two meters off the stranger's hull. "Looks like, ahh, matzoh with a sugar glaze." Without warning, her bowels constricted. The cramp nearly doubled her over inside the suit. A groan wormed

"Your breathing stepped up," Lori said. "You okay?" "Y-veah," she said. She made her tone conversational "Just a little agida." Just scared spitless, she said to herself.

She fastened an adhesive patch to the vehicle and snapped a line to the patch's evebolt. Carefully, she laid both gloves against the surface of the alien, then leaned forward and touched her helmet to it.

"No internal vibrations," she said. She spidered along the hull and paused to take a shaving of material. "Here's something," she said. She traced a panel, about one and a half meters square, set flush with the hull. At one rounded corner of the panel was a slight depression, like an ant-lion pit, four or five centimeters deep. A raised bead sat in its center

"Knock, knock," Carole muttered

"You's there," said Lori.

Using a small gripper attached to her gauntlet, Carole gingerly touched the bead, "It gives a bit," she said. "I'm pushing it in." The hatch cover opened outward on a concealed hinge. "Any energy spikes, Lori?" she asked.

"Nothing reads here. Possibly hydraulic, or mechanical." She peered into the opening. Inside, blackness. She

looked at the inner surface of the hatch. It, too, had a beaded indentation, with the bead raised. She pushed it in; the hatch closed, with the outer bead returning to its original position.

She worked the mechanism several times, "It's consistent," she said. Uneasiness built within her, and she felt perspiration gathering under her arms

Her helmet lamp illuminated a waxy-looking bulkhead two meters in. Carefully, she stuck her head into the hole. The faint carrier signal in her earphones faded slightly.

"We may lose contact inside," she said, and took a deep breath to settle her stomach. "Try to keep a lock on my signal."

"The Chinese'll be here in about four hours," Lori said. "I copy," said Carole, starting to pull herself in

Halfway through the hatch she froze, gripping the rim in unexpected terror. Her heart thumped.

"Carole?" Lori's voice cracked. "Are you all right?" "Wait!" Carole managed to gasp. "Wait."

Scenes of past terrors whipped through her memory: an out-of-control skid on an icy Vermont road; the time she'd ditched in the Atlantic, scrambling out of her floundering T-38.

She had kept her head then; she would keep it now. If you panic, you die, one of her flight instructors had

She fought the fear back, aiming it at the fetus. You're making me feel this, she told it. Just to save your little ass. She realized that never before had she thought of the baby as a person.

Well, it isn't, and this isn't the time to think about it anyway, she thought, forcing her fingers to crawl onto the inner surface of the hull, "I'm all right now," she said. "I'm going in." Shaking, struggling to hold down her gorge, she pulled herself into the alien vessel.

"Your transmission is breaking up a little. Do you copy?

"Yes," Carole said, She swallowed, tasting bile, "I'm in an airlock." She took two deep breaths and felt better. "There's a hatch ahead of me, same bead set-up as the outer one." She closed the outer hatch. The inner one opened

easily, revealing a narrow passageway of grayish waxy material coated with frost. Leaning closer, she cautiously touched it with her glove. Vapor curled away from the spot, swirling in the cone

of light from her helmet lamp. "What's that, smoke?" asked Lori, alarmed,

"No-air," said Carole, licking her lips. "Frozen atmosphere. My suit's warm enough to vaporize it."

She moved slowly into the corridor. It dead-ended to her right. To her left gaped the ice-coated mouth of another passage. She stared at it. After a few seconds the frozen air began evaporating in the light, fogging the chamber

The passage led to a three-way intersection. With a marking crayon, she made an "x" on the side of the corridor and started down the left-hand passage. Ahead of her, it zigzagged off into blackness.

Her feeling of dread lessened. She halted,

"What's the matter?" asked Lori. There was more static lavered on the signal now.

"This isn't the right way," Carole said. She returned to the intersection.

"Right way to what?" Lori asked.

"I-I don't know!" Carole stared at the three dark openings. Her left evelid ticced with stress. She approached each entry in turn and closed her eyes, freeing her fear, inviting it in. It felt strongest at the opening on the right. "This one," she said reluctantly, entering after marking it. It's taunting me with my own fright.

The alien craft seemed to contain nothing but a bewildering maze of featureless passages. Every time Carole faced a choice of direction, she paused while her fear chose one for her.

"... ear me ... abe?" from Lori. Carole heard the frustration in her voice between static bursts. "Too much . . . erference from the structure . . . think."

"Do your best to enhance," Carole said. "I'll keep talking.

". . . don't you . . . out of there?"

"I've got forty-five minutes of air left," said Carole. "If you don't hear from me by then, run like hell."

"No . . . itski," Lori said. ". . . luck."

Carole sighed shakily, and began moving deeper into the ship, toward the point around which it rotated.

Several minutes later the corridor ended in another beaded hatchway.

"No frozen air along here," Carole said. She wondered if Lori could hear her. "Outside temp just below zero centigrade. I wouldn't think that was possible—unless something's warming the air."

She stared at the hatchway, trembling.

Don't open it, her nerves screamed. She had an all but overpowering instant of longing to be back in Bermuda. Suppressing it, she opened the hatch.

Beyond lay another airlock. She entered, her breathing hollow in her helmet. Slowly, she reached out for the mechanism. She closed her eyes and pushed the beads. As the inner hatch opened, she thought of hibiscus blossoms, parrof fish, and the little lizards that scooted along the wall of the Pompano apartment she had shared with Glenn.

Suddenly, with an almost physical sensation of something being snatched away, the fear was gone—and with it the foreboding. She opened her eyes in astonishment.

At first she saw only blobby patches of color. Then her sense of scale and proportion took hold. She remembered that she was supposed to be talking, "Lori, I'm in an irregular chamber about the size of a handball court. It's lined with the same matzoh stuff, but here it's giving off silver light. Can't see how."

She paused, groping for words. "There're clouds in here, thick pink ones the size of a bookcase, maybe. Weird. And—" Her mouth went dry. Something egg-shaped and white floated amid the clouds, something about her size.

One of the pink clouds drifted toward her, obscuring her view of the white thing. She automatically waved her left arm to dissipate it. Droplets condensed on her suit, evaporating instantly, leaving a residue of tiny concentric rhomboids.

Adrenaline kicked her nerves. "Til try to get some shots," she said, lifting her Hasselblad to photograph the white egg. She became conscious of an irritating itch along her left arm but put it out of her thoughts.

She peered through her faceplate, trying to line up a shot. "What the F—" She looked up and gasped. The thing had begun putting forth delicate, jointed limbs. That terrible fear she had felt in the *Argus* again twisted within her.

Then, gently as a falling leaf, something touched her mind.

She tried to move, to turn and leap for the exit, but her muscles refused to obey. She couldn't drop the camera or even speak. She could breathe, but that was all. Paralyzed, she waited for whatever was going to happen next.

Seconds passed, maybe a minute—nothing happened. She stared at what she now knew must be the pilot of this vessel. It made no move to attack her, simply bent and flexed its limbs as it floated. Yet the soft pressure on her thoughts remained. I get it—it's waiting for me to let it in! It doesn't want to force its way in and maybe damage me. Well, no way! She strained, but couldn't so much as twitch.

You bastard, she thought. I get it. Unless I let you in, I don't get out. Her anger flared.

This whole set-up is a trap. You couldn't get us to kill each other, so you're separating us. One at a time. Clever little bug. But you still can't get into my bead unless I let you. Well, I've got less than thirty minutes of air left, and guess what I'll suffocate before I let you take me over.

As if in response, the creature moved, unfolding further from its curled-up ovoid posture. Fascinated despite her fear, Carole suddenly frowned. There was something familiar about the being.

The insect forms she had seen slaving at machines the pilot was of the same race.

For a moment she was stunned. The vision reminded her of the underground Nazi factories of World War II, where prisoners labored to construct V-1 rockets.

Was the pilot an escaped prisoner?

She swallowed. More likely he was one of the rulers, fleeing a violent revolution.

These creatures clearly had powerful mental abilities. What did this one want? Why had it come to Earth?

It didn't matter. If she didn't come out, Lori would never venture in, and the beast would be trapped in its ship, headed for a blazing death in Earth's atmosphere.

Except . . . the Chinese were on their way.

Were she not paralyzed, Carole would have twisted in an agony of frustration. If the monster could get the Chinese astronauts in thrall, it would—what? Try to enslave the entire planet?

Suppose this bastard's as desperate as I am, she thought. It is upon the suppose the state of the suppose that the suppose the suppose that the suppose the suppose I can control me even if I let it in! She tried to keep the realization secluded in a comer of her mind. Suppose I can control in!

It's not like I have anything to lose. . . .

Carole gathered herself. All right, she thought, as "loudly" as she could. Here!

She let her barriers down.

Instantly it tore her mind away. She saw

the immense cell from her previous vision, or one like it, drifting in space. No, not drifting: if felt be solar wind and sent out fields of weak energy like vast sails. Pulsating, it approached an inviting blue world. As it bit air, it the cell encysted in response to atmospheric friction. It felt safely to the ground and exploded into cancerous growth, interpolating its own aggressive genetic material into any and all life forms it touched, beginning with the fastgrowing microorganisms.

Carole tried to ignore the vision, concentrating instead on forcing the invading probe out of her mind. She made a supreme effort—and the scene blinked off, leaving her gasping in reaction. Something squirmed in her head. She fought against it, and it retreated.

Her fingers twitched. She flexed them, then moved her legs. Savage glee suffused her. The creature had lost control of her. "You couldn't do it," she whispered. "I really am too strong!"

Yet the contact had sensitized her. She felt an odd sort of mental irritation. Amputees, she knew, experienced itching and pain in their missing limbs—this feeling was like that: as if a second brain had been removed, leaving phantom impressions of its thoughts.

You're going to let me out of here, she thought at the creature. You're going to die. Die!

There was a peculiar sensation of a barrier falling, shattering into disintegrating fragments. She felt the alien's mind retreating before her onslaught, and fiercely smashed her way onward.

) Without warning, it attacked again, with an image so shocking she couldn't muster her defenses:

She was in a place of dirt and clinging webs. Soublugs scattered as she scrabbled through the litter under the porch. Dusty rays of light squeezing through the slats left little diamonds on the rubble.

I won't go, Carrie thought as she crawled. I won't! It doesn't make sense—you can't name a baby when it hasn't been born. I won't go to Kevin's funeral, no matter what!

"Carrie?" Rowan, ber elder sister, called in a voice thick from crying, "Carrie? We gotta go. Everybody's wattin',"

No! Carrie shouted.

She was back in the alien ship. The pilot floated nearby, fully unfolded. It had no eyes, but it seemed to Carole that it watched her. She felt no fear, only a deep, aching sadness.

"When I was eight," Carole said softly, "my mom got pregnant. She was forty-two and really wanted the baby. It went wrong, and she had to have an abortion at eight months. And . . . and she never recovered."

The alien remained motionless, attempting no telepathic contact.

She licked her lips. "I used to think my mom was weak because she caved in after that. But it was my own fear, distorting my view. I've been afraid... of getting pregnant, of having a baby. I couldn't admit it, even to myself. I told myself I didn't want this baby because it would hurt my career." She managed a twisted smile. "You made me face it."

The alien slowly put forth a jointed leg and touched the side of her helmet.

She drew a deep breath. "Okay," she said. "Let's do it." And she opened her mind fully to the creature. . . .

It thought of itself as the Rider. It called the spacefaring virus haclahů: life eater.

The Rider's people had been on the point of developing interstellar travel when the haclahn invaded their star system. Though the Rider's people ultimately found a way to combat the invader, the discovery came too late to save their world. Assailed by ravenous, deformed monsters that had been their own people, the uninfected Riders labored to build seven slower-than-light space vehicles, with the intention of warning other civilizations of the

haclahñ. Starving, they ate their own fallen workers and slaved on. Their citadel was attacked, but before it was destroyed they managed to launch three yessels.

You were trying to tell us what you had endured to reach us, Carole thought.

Affirmation from the Rider.

In suspended animation, the Rider passed long years tended by the pink clouds, which were assemblages of microscopic machines. The nanorobots also maintained the ship.

Sixty-five years earlier, the Rider's ship had caught the fringe of an expanding sphere of radio signals. At the center of that sphere was Earth.

Arriving in orbit, the ship scanned the planet. It found a mad, conflicting patchwork of violence and lightning change, similar to its programmed memories of symptoms of baclabii infection. It roused the Rider for help.

Without actually encountering a member of the dominant species, the Rider himself couldn't tell if the chaotic planet was diseased. He needed an individual to examine. He altered his vessel's orbit, hoping to attract the at-

tention of one or another of the groups that occasionally lofted a ship.

"And TranSolar happened to notice before anyone else." Carole said aloud.

Agreement emanated from the alien.

"You tried to get to us from the bottom up, through the most primitive emotions: fear, rage, jealousy. So now we know," said Carole. "We know you're here, and you know we aren't infected. Now what?"

The alien's soft, pulsating face gave no clue of its emotions, if any. Glistening flaps opened and closed. Blinking? Or attempts at speech?

The Rider raised a delicate arm. Fascinated, she stared at it. Long, rubbery tendons crisscrossed the appendage, trembling. The arm's narrow tip grew rigid, as though a coating of horn was being swiftly secreted over it. Within moments it became a talon.

Terror exploded in her. The Rider drew back its claw, paused, then, as she tried to twist away, plunged it into its own thorax and began to cut.

As its fluids gushed, the pink clouds closed in, frothing. Within seconds, they consumed the alien, leaving only a thinning haze settling over her suit in spreading fractal patterns.

The clouds retreated to the center of the chamber and compacted into a sphere. It began pulsating. Pink light flooded out in waves from its center. The walls of the chamber also began to glow. To Carole's horror, the glow intensified and began eating away at the material.

Her breath caught in her throat. She glanced at the air gauge on her wrist. I've got to get out of here!

She jetted to the airlock and crammed in, risking a glance over her shoulder as the door slid shut. The Rider's chamber was breaking apart.

She squeezed through the outer door and flew off down the left-hand corridor branch.

Her blazes were gone. She paused, panting, and tried to think. Had she simply missed one? Or had she marked frozen air which vaporized, destroying the mark?

She looked around in desperation. Behind her, spread-

ing veins of pink fire laced the corridor walls.

She fled blindly. Minutes passed as she skimmed through featureless, twisting tunnels. She was breathing the air in her suit now. Her lungs burned. Red shapes swam across her vision. Something seemed to be slowly pushing a blunt needle into her brain.

She slammed into a wall. Stunned, she fell back, drifting a little to one side. Her vision flickered. Frost vanished from the wall in front of her. A blizzard

of air-snow blew around her suit. Pink sparks twinkled amid the snowflakes, eating

away the wall as though it were flashpaper.

Hull compromised? she thought dimly. Atlantis decompressed-blew air out. Gasping, Carole fumbled at her thruster controls. Try to crash through the bulkhead.

A soundless explosion of light blinded her. Moments later she found herself floating in a thin miasma, all that was left of the ship. The mist settled on her suit, etching frostlike patterns there before sinking in. Again her skin tingled briefly.

What have you done to me? she wondered, staring wildly at the dissipating cloud.

The Argus appeared through dimming radiance, gliding toward her. Black curtains hemmed in her sight. Vaguely, she saw an Asian face in the front port.

What bappened to Lori? Thoughts whirled away.

She came to in a crowded space she didn't recognize: her suit was being peeled off her by Lori. Two Asian men gripped handholds behind the scientist.

Lori chuckled, following Carole's line of sight over her shoulder. "This is the Laoving," she said. "The Chinese were coming, remember? They got here early, just in time to watch the alien disintegrate—and incidentally to save your bee-hind. Whoa-don't talk, breathe," Lori pressed an oxygen mask over Carole's mouth and nose. "They're understandably curious, and sort of insisted I come over here to talk.

"Disintegrated . . . gone?"

Lori nodded.

"Oh, man . . ." Carole settled back, drawing the oxygen deep into her lungs. It made her light-headed.

"And, let's see, who else called? Well, NORAD's been, on the line, and the Japanese, the Israelis, my boss, your

boss . . . Shall I go on?" "No." Carole closed her eyes. It didn't make any sense. Why send a suicide mission to the stars?

The Rider couldn't simply have killed himself as an expression of grief from one who preferred to die with his civilization. She knew, with a certainty that clarified her thoughts like a faceful of cold water, that the alien's death and the destruction of his all-but-living ship furthered his mission in some way.

"We are wishing to talk to you," said one of the Chinese astronauts. He didn't look threatening, just curious: avidly curious.

"Back off," said Lori, helping Carole into her hammock. "No, it's okay," said Carole. She motioned to the Hasselblad hooked to her suit. "It's all there."

"And on video," said Weyler, "I'll take our hosts up to the command deck and play the tape for 'em. Come on, guys. Be back in a sec, babe, okay?

"I'll be fine." Carole said. "It's all there." she repeated. But it isn't: only what you can see.

What one couldn't see, she knew, was the sensitization she had experienced through mental contact with the Rider. Of all Earth's billions, she alone had knowledge of the baclabñ.

Knowledge of how to fight it.

Knowledge, she thought. Coded information. She remembered the nanotech clouds and how they had condensed on her suit and soaked into it, through it-

In an instant of total clarity, a thrill of horror and revulsion rippled through her. The way it worked itself into my mind; it found its way into my body too! Into my cells, all my cells-into the replicating cells inside my womb! She knew it with a cold, new certainty.

Eves closed, she listened to Lori: "Look, the Commander needs a little catnap before she'll answer any questions. Give her some space, if you'll excuse my idiom,"

By the time the baclabn arrived, Earth might be able to fight it off. Even as it decimated the Rider's people. they learned a thing or two about how it worked its genetic manipulations across numberless alien species. Via coded pulses of radiation and the nanotech clouds, the Rider's ship had delivered instructions to her DNA, instructions designed to provide it with the ability to act as a platform for a baclabñ-resistant strain of plasm. That Homo sapiens would no longer be strictly human meant nothing to the Rider, given its long-range perspective on what it saw as a "humanitarian" act.

Fine for you. Carole thought, Maybe you've saved us. But I don't know what I am, any more. Or what this

There would be no abortion. Nor would she dare pass the baby along for adoption.

She opened her eyes and saw, outside the Laoying, the voluptuous curve of Earth. Beyond it, she knew, were the planets and the stars.

I'll never see them. She touched her belly. Except in the flesh. •

Living in Memory

Susan Wade

She woke frightened, knowing she was lost.

The room was warm, rosily lamp-lit, comfortably cluttered. It had the look of a lived-in bedroom in an upper-class subdivision, done in shades of bronze and russet, with furnishings of golden oak. The face, which smilled from its hovering position above her, was warm and golden too.

And yet, something was missing. Undefined, perhaps undefinable; still she felt its lack.

Neither the face nor the room was familiar.

Wanting to weep, afraid to, she said nothing. At some level, she felt the room and the face should have been instantive reassuring to her. Instead they only underlined what should have been there, but wasn't.

"Rosanna' You're awake," said the person with her, and his smile broadened. Lean, brown-faced man, she categorized to herself. Tall, hazel eyes, tawny undertones to the light brown hair. Her litany continued, carrying nothing



Hustration by Nick Smith

with it but empty words, failing to bring any echo of remembrance.

"Rosanna? What's wrong? Can't you talk?" the man said, and his smile was gone.

She moistened her lips with a stale tongue, and even that movement was unfamiliar.

"Who's Rosanna?" she asked.

I remember. I remember the library on a rainy Sunday, stuffy with noise and activity, and far too many people.

I'd forgotten my book bag, so my arms sagged under the weight of my books as I stood in the long line at the circulation desk.

I sighed, shifted to the other leg, and shrugged at my heavy jacket. Arms too full to hold it, I was wearing it, in spite of the overheated room.

I remember the wonderful coolness of the wet air on my face as I walked from the library to my car, two blocks away. I remember the tingling freshness on my checks and nose, the chill that made me feel them, really feel the structure of my face, all the way home.

I remember the damp taste of early spring. The rich, new green of spreading clumps of clover in the park, vivid under the colorless wet sky and the bare dark trees.

I remember the black, undulating V of the flock of ducks that passed overhead, a crisp sign against the sky. I remember.

The two men stood in the darkened hospital corridor outside the bedroom "set" and watched over the sleeping woman. The younger of the two, Joel Richardson, was a tall, fair-haired man in his flate thirties. Frank Medrano was shorter and stockler, a vigorous man in his fifties who was feeling more than his share of despair: he was Rosanna's father, Joel's friend.

Joel leaned his face against the one-way glass and sighed. Frank put a hand on his shoulder and said, "You told me it's too soon to tell—why are you so upset?"

"She doesn't even remember her *name*, Frank. Forget that she doesn't know me, or even you; she doesn't know who *sbe* is. Of course I'm upset. We've never had such a deep diffusion effect with any of our other patients."

"It thought that was the whole point. Rosie told me you were going to try for greater memory penetration, since medication wasn't helping," Frank said, looking at his friend. "She understood the risks, that the whole thing is still experimental."

"That doesn't make it any better," Joel muttered. Frank's gaze returned to his daughter's motionless form. "Anything is better than how she was, Joey-boy. That's how she felt."

"I know. It's just—it's harder to be objective when it's Rosanna this is happening to. For Christ's sake, I've loved her since she was four years old." He scrubbed his hands over his face, exhausted. "Ever since that summer! stayed with you and Anna, when I was seven. I got there, and here was this tiny girl, half my size, as fragile as a china doll and wild as an Indian. She terrified me I. spent the whole summer chasing after her to make sure she didn't kill herself." His voice broke. "I'm sorry, I didn't think..."

"So kay," Frank cracked his knuckles. "Look, you said there are no guarantees that she"ll recover her memory. And even if she does, it still doesn't mean the treatment will work. So the whole thing is a gamble." He turned to jab a forefinger at Joel's middle. "But my daughter is one brilliant lady. And she believed in what you're doing enough to bet her future on it. I have faith in her decision."

"That's what it all comes down to, isn't it?" Joel said.
"Faith. For her sake, I wish I'd had more practice at it."
The two men turned back to their vigil.

Joel pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat facing his patient. His patient, he reminded himself, not Rosanna. The subliminal tones they used to induce sleep had been stopped ten minutes before. She should wake any time.

stopped ten minutes before. She should wake any time. He watched it happen. A flicker of dark lashes, followed by total, paralyzed rigidity.

"Hi," he said, as softly as he could. Her eyes opened, closed, then half-opened again. Behind the screening lashes, he knew she was watching him. "Did you sleep well?" Meaningless, but maybe the standard question would reassure her. He thought she relaxed slightly, but she didn't answer.

"I'm your doctor, Joel Richardson," he continued, then paused.

She nodded, a short, almost furtive movement. He let the silence drag out, willing her to speak, to give him some clue.

She turned her face away from him and said in a rusty voice, "Yes, I remember."

"You do?" He couldn't control the excitement, not completely, and she flinched.

"From last time," she said after a second,

"Right," he said, not missing a beat. He noticed that she didn't place the timing of last night's encounter, and wondered if she were able to. He forced his attention back to this moment—he wanted to do his best work for her, not let his feelings affect her care. "I want to talk with you about your treatment," he said. "Do you feel up to it?"

After a few seconds she nodded. It was as if his words were being relayed by satellite, with a transmission lag. "You're aware," he said, stumbling through the sen-

"You're aware," he said, stumbling through the ser tence, "of, um, blank spots? In your memory?"

Lag time, then a straight shot at those dark eyes for the first time since he'd walked into the room. "More like spots of memory in a giant blank," she said, and she sounded almost like Rosanna.

He let himself smile. "I see. Well, what I wanted to talk with you about is the fact that the blankness is deliberate." He watched her absorb that. "It's a new type of therapy, known as Stimulation-Diffusion Memory Restructuring, DMR. It involves the selective electronic stimulation of memory." He stopped, watching her closely. "Following me so far?"

A nod.

"Right," he said. "Once the memories of a center are stimulated, we immediately hit them with another charge. That causes selective memory loss." She frowned. It gave her the look of a serious child. "Diffusion of memory," she muttered.

He waited to see if she would say more, then took a deep breath. "We know there are two types of memory: abstract memory, which lets you recognize patterns independently of the incident where you learned about such things; and event memory, which is just that—memory of specific events. Does that make sense to you?"

The lag was longer this time. Then, "You mean, that's why I can talk, and I know that this is a bed"—she patted the covers next to her—"and that's a chair"—she pointed to his chair—"but I don't remember anything about my own life?"

Guilt slammed him. He had to take a moment to stabilize before he could say, "Yes. Your abstract memory is intact. Your event memory has been restructured."

"Don't you really mean destroyed?"

"Not really," he said. "You see, there are redundancies. The process we use just diffuses the memory connections. Gradually, the brain builds new pathways and"—he hesitated for a second—"memory returns."

She thought about it for a while. "Is it like what happens when a stroke victim starts to recover?" she asked.

"Very similar," he agreed, encouraged that she remembered so much. He shifted in the chair, leaning toward her. "You seem to understand all this pretty well. Do you have any questions about the procedure?"

It startled him when she sat up and hugged her knees. Over the weeks, he'd become accustomed to seeing her immobile, a silent figure in the bed. She leaned forward, and a spate of dark curls fell over her eyes. Impatiently, she shoved them back and looked at him. "Just one question, really, Doctor."

Her use of the title burst the illusion that he was talking to his love, to his partner, to Rosanna. Dealing with it, trying not to let it show, her question took a second to resister on him.

"Why did you do it?"

I remember.

I remember the sentient hush of the night, moonfrosted, snow-silvered, blue-shadowed. The white-water sound of the wind in the pine trees, the stinging hiss of my skis in the snow.

I rounded a curve and came out from under the trees into dazzling moonlight. Overhead, the sky had the cold-star look it only gets in midwinter, clear and deep as antique plate glass. Then a quick rush of downhill in the last tiny slope to the cabin. Yellow light spilled out the front door, alien in the blue frosted night. Cold and breathless, I hit the releases on my skis and carried them onto the porch.

Joel was waiting, of course. He wrapped me in a blanket, warm from the fire. "Idiot! You know better than to go out by yourself, especially at night."

I laughed, still buzzing from the cross-country, from the perfection of the night. "I know, I know, but you were sleeping so peacefully, and it was gorgeous out. Besides, I just took the usual track. You would have come for me if I'd been late." He tumbled me onto the rug in front of the fire and stripped off my parka and boots. "Yeah, if I hadn't worried myself into a heart attack first. Idiot."

He rubbed my feet until they tingled. I remember the fire was hot on my back, on the side of my face; tanging the air in the cabin with a wild smoky smell, crackling to itself in a song of great burnings.

I remember.

I rem—

Rosanna broke the point of her pencil as she formed the first "m." She stared down at the letters and felt as if the rage inside her would explode and destroy the world.

It was appropriate that she had broken her pencil before she could complete the phrase. She didn't remember. And this fragment of genuine memory, faithfully recorded with her other pitiful fragments, was proof that she didn't.

She was almost thirty-four, and what she could actually recall of her old life totaled less than six hours. Her recent memories were fine; she had a clear recollection of the time since her treatment—nearly four months, now. Along with a few precious, vivid pieces of her life from before. But the contrast between those real memories and the kind of distanced recall she had of most of her old life was bitter.

Rosanna took another pencil from the holder on her desk and wrote beneath her truncated entry, 6/24ths of 1/356th of 1/34th is not enough.

Then she closed the journal and slid it carefully into a drawer.

Joel pulled the Blazer into the driveway slotted into the curve of the hill where the house nestled, flanked by mountain laurels and bare Spanish oaks. He had brought her to "their" house, the one they had shared before her treatment.

This was her first field trip in the four and a half months since she'd awakenche ther first time away from the hospital. She knew Joel was concerned about what memories coming here might stir up for her. He had only allowed the trip because of her despondency. With her history of chronic depression, any change of mood worried him.

Joel was certain that, given time, her complete memory would return: the remaining factual gaps would be filled in. He could make no claim, however, about the quality of that memory; whether the treatment's screening effect would ever lessen.

She looked around the earth-toned living room of her home, bright with hand-painted furniture and the sunlight from its dozen windows. Joel had told her they'd lived here for four years. She felt nothing.

Joel said, "Look." She turned to see him run a hand over the weathered lid of a pine chest. "You found this on one of our hiking trips, when you came across the Mescalero equivalent of a garage sale." He grinned at her. "We had to rent a jeep to get it down the mountain —I thought we'd never make it, the trails were so bad, but you insisted."

She looked at the glowing surface of the old wood, at the scored lines that added definition. Felt nothing. "Oh," she said

"You don't remember?" he asked. The words vibrated with repressed feelings, and for a second she hated him for feeling something for her, when she couldn't feel anything for herself. It wasn't there; the element she was searching for just wasn't there.

She walked to one of the windows to look out at the fallow yard. Part of her mind supplied the information that the two of them had often worked together in the garden, but she had no image of how it looked, how it had smelled, in bloom.

With her hands tucked under her arms, she gave a half-shrug and tried to answer his question. I remember all kinds of stuff." She hesitated. How could she make him understand what it was like? 'I took my M.D. at 'Washing-ton State. I wore braces when I was eleven. My mother committed suicide the summer I turned eight." She stopped. It was meaningless, nothing but statistics, information that had no personal relevance. "Don't you see, loeP I remember the facts, but they don't mean anything."

She heard his footsteps behind her, was grateful when he didn't touch her. "Of course they don't. They're not part of your reality any more. That's good; it's what the treatment was all about—letting go of the emotionally charged memories that were at the core of your illness."

Rosanna felt like beating her hands against the window, but knew Joel would panic. He'd probably sedate her. "Don't you see?" she asked, forcing her voice level. "Everything I am is tied up in those memories. And now they don't belong to me any more."

"Of course they do," he said in the voice she'd heard him use the week before with an hysterical patient. "You said yourself that you remember most things—it's just the dangerous part that's gone, the painful qualities. This way you can remember without being affected."

"Stop it!" She whirled, and he flinched. "Just stop it, would you? I don't want you to be the brilliant psychiatric researcher here. I want you to *listen* to me."

He just stood there, watching her, waiting.

She took a deep breath and said, more calmly, "I don't remember like you do, like normal people do. Have you thought about what it's like to know all these things—everything that happened between us—and feel like they happened to someone else? It's like I'm just an intruder, reading a dead woman's diary."

"That's—" He stopped, then drew a long, unsteady breath. "You're alive, Rosie." He touched her face. She knew he had done it a hundred times before, just so, his palm against her cheek, fingers cradling her just. But this was the first time she had felt it; smelled the scrubbed scent of his skin, the strong leanness of the muscles and bones, the rough texture of his fingertips.

Tears overflowed her eyes in an instant, a hot rush that spilled over his hand. She said, "Don't you see? I'm not the same person you've known all your life. I'm not that kid you chased; I'm not the—"

He interrupted her. "The woman I loved?"
The words choked off in her throat.

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His face flushed as he went on, "But you are that woman. The way you move, your expressions, gestures, everything! Look." Gently he took her hands and lifted them until they were in front of her eyes. "You always clench your fists when you cry, like you're going to fight off the sadness."

Rosanna looked at her white-knuckled hands, and all she saw were the long pink scars that ran up the inside of her forearms. She pulled away. Maybe he was right. She did want to fight this thing that was wrong with her. A physical problem to wrestle with; that would be fine. But this stranger-to-herself feeling was unbearable. "I just want to know who I am," she said, more to herself than to him.

"You're yourself," Joel said. "Just accept it. Those memories are separate for a reason. Let it be, okay? You're Rosanna, and that's all that matters." He touched her face again, tracing a line from temple to jaw.

Her throat felt tight and hot; she wasn't sure she could talk, even if she had known what to say.

"Quit fighting it, Rosie." Joel's voice dropped. "The feelings you want are still there, part of you. Just let go of trying to remember, and they'll come back to you. I know they will."

She closed her eyes, suddenly exhausted, sick of it. "You don't understand."

His hand dropped away from her face. "Give me some credit, for Christ's sake. I know I don't understand, but at least I'm trying. Have you tried to understand what it's like for me?"

Rosanna looked at him, surprised.

"Look, I'm not trying to dump a bunch of feelings on you that you're not ready for. When we made the decision about the treatment, I knew it meant letting go of you. I thought it was worth it; a new chance for you. But I didn't know how it would feel, having everything we were to each other wiped out of your mind."

Rosanna thought about it. She had come to count on Joel and Frank to know her. It was part of how she defined who she was. "I think I see."

"I didn't mean to go into all this. Not yet. But I think if you'll quit trying to force things, the feelings you're searching for will surface. I'm sure they'll come back to you."

Rosanna looked at him. "What if they don't?"

She watched the confident facade dissolve, read the devastation underneath. She thought she would just hold him while he cried.

In the end, they held each other.

I remember.

I remember sliding heat, strong hands, the taste of his mouth. The fresh scorched scent of cotton sheets, the silky thickness of his hair. The moments when our entire bodies shook with our heartbeats.

I remember the bone-deep warmth that came after.

I remember.

"Hey, kiddo, how about a game of gin?"

Rosanna shut the neurology book in front of her with

a thud, and turned to watch him come into her hospital bedroom.

Frank had the hurriedly dressed look she had come to know was typical: grey cashmere sweater stretched a bit over his middle, scuff marks on the handmade shoes, his salt-and-pepper pelt of hair rumpled. He grinned, and she felt a rush of warmth.

"It's good to see you, Pop. But why would a busy guy like you waste a Wednesday afternoon on gin rummy? They close all the golf courses for Lent?"

He plopped on the bed and bounced a few times. When she made a face, he said innocently, "Just checking the springs," and Rosanna realized with a shock that slye loved him.

"What's the matter," he asked, "can't you knock off the books for an hour to get trounced by your old man? I'll tell you what, kiddo. You're going to wear out that new brain if you keep it up."

She laughed. This was why she loved Frank. Not because of the history he shared with that other Rosanna, but because of how he treated ber, Rosanna-now. He didn't tiptoe. Frank treated her like the new person she was—this strange conglomerated being who also happened to be his beloved daughter. Contradictory, she supposed, but then, that was Frank's style.

"I guess I can knock off long enough to whup you, Pop," she said.

He beamed and rolled off the bed. Opening the he beamed and rolled out a deck of cards and gave them a flourishing waterfall shuffle. He stood there for a second, then asked, "Can't you even offer your old man a chaif?" She suspected something then, but got up to drag another chair over.

Frank was studying the titles of the books on her desk when she turned back. He took the seat she offered, then looked at her and waggled an eyebrow. "A Comprebensive Analysis of the Chemistry of Brain Dysfunction, Pretty hefty stuff, Rosie. Planning to start back with your practice soon?"

She sat down and, because it was Frank, told him the truth. "I can't. I'm not really remembering all the stuff from before. Not like I remember waking up in this room." She took the deck of cards from him and idly riffled it.

"What do you mean?" he said, using his quiet voice.

"It's hard to describe," she told him. "It's like—maybe like being deaf, and having someone translate an opera for you in sign language. The communication's there, you definitely know what's happened, but it's nothing like hearing it yourself." She shuffled the cards again.

"I don't get it, sweetie."

"I don't know how else to explain it. It's like there's an entire dimension of life that's missing from my memories of before. All the gut stuff is gone. And feelings play a big part in practicing medicine. Until that part comes back to me, I'm not sure I even want the Board to reinstate me."

"Why not? You do remember."

She just shook her head. "It's not the same."

He hesitated for a second, then asked, "Have you talked to Joel about it?"

"No. Don't say anything either, will you, Pop?"

"He's your doctor, Rosie."

"He's more than that—at least to him he is." She got up and paced a little, waving her hands. "It gets so complicated. There's all this history between us that means so much to him. But for me, that's all it is—history. Like something I read in a book."

He looked at her closely. "If it's all history, you could stop seeing him. There are other doctors."

Rosunna paused, then after a second she smilled. "You never let me get away with fooling myself, do you? It matters . . . Joel matters to me. Maybe too much." She forced a laugh. "I swear, sometimes I feel jealous of that other Rosanna."

"It must be hard, trying to be two people," he said.
"Yeah, it's driving me crazy."

"No," he said, suddenly more serious than she had ever seen him. "You're not crazy. I remember what that was like, and this ain't it."

Rosanna collapsed on the bed. "That's what I'm talking about, Pop. Why should you know more about me than I know mysel? I remember the facts of it, what I did, but I don't remember how I felt, the living part of things. Even the night I cut my wrists—I know which scalpel I used; that I stood in the kitchen and watched my blood run down the sink. But I don't remember how I felt, "what made me think that dying was the only thing left."

Her father stood up and his face was set. "I hope you never remember that, Rosanna. I pray to God you never have to live through those feelings again."

"I have to understand who I am. I will."

Suddenly his face relaxed, and he smiled. "I never saw anyone more sure of who they are, and what they need than you are, sweetie. Listen to you, telling me 'I will.' It makes me believe you will, too. And it gives me faith that you're strong enough to handle it."

Rosanna nodded. "I am, you know." She stood up, then added, "He asked me to move home with him." "Yeah, he told me. You know you're welcome back at the Rancho Deluxe, too, don't you?"

at the Rancho Deluxe, too, don't you?"

She smiled at him. "Thanks. But, for now, I want to stay here. Neutral ground, you know? At least until I'm

stay here. Neutral ground, you know? At least until I'm sure how I feel."

Frank surprised her with a bear hug. She wasn't surprised he would hug her, only that she would find so

much comfort in it.

"Don't sweat it, kiddo. You're doing just fine. Hang on, okay? That's all I ask, that you hang on."

on, okay: that's ail t ask, that you hang on. That was all he asked of her, she knew it. Rosanna scruffed her face against his sweater, and felt safe. "I feel like I inherited things from her. From that other Rosanna's she said with some difficulty. "Obligations, you know?"

Maybe even some ideas. But I'll tell you the best thing I inherited." She swallowed. "Her family."

His arms tightened for a second before he let her go. He cleared his throat and said, "It's almost two o'clock,

and I still haven't won any of your money."

She ducked her head so he wouldn't see her smile. "You won't, either. I shuffled the cards." She picked them up and did it once more, just to make sure.

Frank watched glumly, "I went to a lot of trouble to stack those cards, Rosanna."

This time she couldn't hide the grin. "I know, Pop. Here, deal."

Joel removed the chambered slide from the microscope with tweezers, making the maneuver look easy. "You're ten for ten, sweetheart. Enough for one day?"

Rosanna arched, and pressed her knuckles against her lower back. The white lab coat was crisp against her hands. Being here again felt right, natural. Better than she had imagined.

Joel laid his hand over the nape of her neck and massaged the muscles that had tightened. She'd forgotten what hours of leaning over a microscope did to your back. "Ready for dinner?" he asked.

Rosanna smiled and eased into the pressure of his fingers. "I suppose," she said. She leaned back against him, content to rest there a moment; doing nothing, going nowhere.

After a second, she murmured, "You're a good teacher. Lots of patience, especially having to go back to basics like this."

He brushed a wisp of hair back from her ear. "I like being with you, working with you. It's—" He hesitated for a second, and she turned to look at him.

"Just say it," she told him. "You can't censor what you say to me for the rest of our lives."

He smiled. "You're right. I was going to say, it's a chance to get to know you. Until I realized how strange it sounded."

"Not strange at all. I'm not the same person now."

"I know." He looked at her. "Actually, you've retained a lot. I'm amazed at how much you remember."

"I've just been studying."

"Oh," he said. "Look, I understand why you won't go back into practice. It's probably a good decision. Stress may have contributed to what happened before. But I think you could move into a research slot easily, without any risk."

She tensed. "Without risking another breakdown?"

He looked startled. "No. I meant without risking some-

He looked startled. "No. I meant without risking someone's life on your rebuilt memory." He shrugged, "It was just a thought. I hate to see your ability go to waste."

Rosanna felt something she hadn't known was caged break loose inside her chest. She reached for Joel's hand, still resting on her shoulder. Its warm roughness felt familiar and right, like the lab coat. "Thank you. It's a great idea. And now I've ot one."

He seemed to relax a little. "What's that?"

"Come help me pack my stuff. I'm ready to go home."

I remember. I remember coming home from Sarah's party, relieved they'd gotten the juice off my frilly white dress. You couldn't tell. I looked just perfect. Just the way Mama wanted me to look.

I stood on the porch, out of sight, until the Parkers drove away. As I waited in the hidden warmth of lateafternoon shadows, there was a horrible smashing sound from inside. I pressed my face against the screen, smelling the rusty musty smell of it, feeling the wire mesh mark my nose.

I could see through the entryway, across the hall to part of the dining room. Something sparkly flew across the open space and shattered against the wall. Again, then again, a piece at a time, the amber crystal goblets flew and crashed.

I ran. Through the vacant lot behind our house to my hiding place. I found a piece of cardboard to sit on so my dress wouldn't get dirty. I stayed as long as I could; until the air got cool and the crickets started to creak.

Maybe Papa would be there soon.

I had to go home; I wasn't allowed out after sunset. The house was quiet when I got back, the rooms dark. I opened the screen door, squeaky on its hinges. No one came.

No one screamed at me.

I walked across the entryway, headed for the hall to my bedroom. I couldn't help seeing into the dining room. On the floor, against the wall, was a huge glittering pile of amber crystal shards. Some of the pieces were edeed with silver stuff. Some were eddeed with blood.

I remember. Oh, God, I remember.

Rosanna slammed the journal shut, pushed herself away from the desk, then stood up and walked shakily to the living room. It had grown dusk while she wrote, and now the lamplight seemed very bright. She went to a small alcove in the corner, where the china cabinet stood.

On the third shelf, by itself, was an amber-tinted water goblet with a platinum rim. The crystal was very fine, if twenty-five years out of style.

Rosanna opened the glass door of the cabinet and lifted down the goblet. The crystal was cool and heavy. "I always wondered," Rosanna whispered, "why you only broke eleven of them. Mama."

She stood there, the glass weighting her hand. "You left one for me. didn't you?"

The front door opened behind her, bringing in a rush of damp spring air and the smell of Chinese food.

"Rosanna?" Tension was an undercurrent in Joel's voice, as if he were never certain she would be there to answer. "Rosanna!" He'd seen her now, and she could hear his relief.

She turned toward him, still holding the goblet. His hands were laden with styrofoam boxes.

"It's our first anniversary," he told her, his hazel eyes bright. "Your first week home. I brought dinner from Sun Lee's. Like we used to . . ." The sentence trailed off, and he looked away from her. His voice went flat. "We used to do that on Friday nights."

Rosanna smelled the warm spices of the food; she saw the man she loved haloed in lamplight, with the cool darkness of the open doorway behind him. Her heart contracted as the moment jelled into memory. Real memory, the kind you lived in.

She turned to set the goblet on its shelf, and carefully closed the door.

Then she smiled at him, so the lie wouldn't show. "I remember," she said. ◆

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After-Image

Phil Foglio

Andrew Milson stepped into the teleport booth and dialed Dallas. The doorseals clicked battle as the machine scanned his I.D. The lights flickered briefly and a panel before his face lit up: HYDRA-WAVE LINES TEMPORARILY OVERLOADED. PLEASE REPORT TO ROOM 106 FOR REFUND. THANK YOU FOR USING TITET.

There was a pneumatic "woof" from beneath his feet, and the floor dropped out from under him. One heart-stopping second later, Andrew was falling down a slide that quickly dumped him into a large foam cushion that occupied the center of an empty, dimly lit room. Before him was an open doorway. On the wall beyond, he saw a small sign that said ROOM 106 with an arrow underneath pointing off to the left.

Andrew took a deep breath and pulled himself from the cushion. "What the hell is going on here?" he shouted. There was no reply. "This is no way to treat a steady customer, by damn!" Straightening his facket, he stepped out into the hallway. It was also dimly



lit, with cinderblock walls painted a ghastly shade of industrial green. As he strode down the corridor he realized that the rooms he was passing weren't offices; through the reinforced windows, he could see enough to identify them as maintenance dumps and energy plants. His temper continued to climb as he continued onward. Turning a corner, he saw light spilling out into the corridor from a room up ahead. The open door simply read 106.

It was an office, cramped and sparsely furnished, with an air of disuse which was not dispelled by the small grey-haired man who sat behind the sole desk and waved Andrew to the only other chair. Andrew sat down and opened his mouth to speak. The man behind the desk thrust a palm forward and theatrically placed his other hand to his temple.

"Hold on," he said. "Your name . . . is . . . Andrew!" He opened one eve. "How'd I do?"

Andrew blinked. "Uh . . . right. How did you--?" The man behind the desk dismissed the question with a wave of his hand, "It's no big deal, Trust me, I cheat, Now, you have a problem with one of our booths, right?"

Andrew's temper flared, "You bet I've got a problem! I almost had a heart attack when the floor dropped out from under me! What kind of idiotic refund system is this?! I've been using T-booths for years and I've never had to put up with anything like this! If I miss my appointment in Dallas, I'll-"

The little man made a calming motion with his hand. "I can guarantee that you won't miss your appointment, and, since you didn't ask, I'm Dr. Sefton." He stuck out his hand.

"Milson, Andrew Milson, Look, I use the T-booths all the time and I've never heard of the lines being 'overloaded' before, and I especially don't want to hear about it when I'm on my way to an important meeting. I don't mean to be rude, but I'd just as soon get going, if you don't mind." Dr. Sefton's hand had remained out all through Andrew's speech. Andrew noticed it now and briefly shook it.

At that moment, about ten feet to the left, a bowling ball dropped out of a hole in the ceiling and fell straight into a matching hole in the floor with a muffled Glumf! Andrew jumped. "What the hell was that?"

Dr. Sefton smiled, "Nothing important, One of those balls drops every two minutes or so. You get used to it."

"I'd rather not. Now, about my refund . . . " "Certainly! Certainly! But first let me tell you how the

Teleportation Booths work." Andrew rolled his eyes, "This will help get me out of

"Absolutely," said Sefton, sitting back, "Now, when you

enter the booth, it scans you, right down to your atomic structure and beyond, out to all thirteen and a half dimensions. Then that information is sent via Hydra-wave to a receiving station. From this information, a new you is built from scratch. Completely and perfectly identical with the old one, right down to completing the very thought that was begun when you were being scanned. Pretty keen, huh?"

Andrew looked puzzled. "That's not what . . . "

Sefton broke in. "Well of course the Teleportation Ad Council isn't going to tell you how it really works, because then people would realize that technically you die each time you travel. A hard thing to build an upbeat ad campaign around, no?"

Andrew sat up. "You what?!"

"Weren't you listening? The booth doesn't move you, it duplicates you. Now can you imagine the problems if there was an Andrew Milson in Chicago and other, totally indistinguishable Andrews knocking about in Dallas. Osaka, Toronto and Luna City Three? Trust me, you can't. So the scanning process does more than just scan, it disintegrates you at the same time, so that there is only one Andrew Milson at any time." Sefton paused. "And he's in Dallas."

Andrew shivered. "Huh?"

A voice behind Andrew spoke up. "Don't listen to him. He's crazy."

Andrew swiveled in his chair and saw a young man in a four-piece business suit standing in the doorway. He was clutching a briefcase in both hands. "I don't know what's going on here," the young man said, "but he won't let us out of this basement."

Doctor Sefton sighed. "Andrew Milson, this is Leon Clover," He winked at Andrew, "He's always very difficult to convince."

"Look," said Andrew, "I don't know what's going on between you two, and I don't care. All I want is to get out of here. Since you don't seem inclined to help me. I'll just find someone who can." With that he stood up and, with a final defiant look at Sefton, strode out of the room, followed by Clover.

Leon caught up to Andrew. "Good for you," Leon said. "Maybe between the two of us we can get out of

"Who is that guy? What was that bullshit he was giving me about the T-booths duping you?"

Leon looked scornful. "I told you, he's crazy."

"Yeah, well . . . so what do you mean, we're trapped?" "All the doors are locked. Everything down here is run on automatic."

Andrew tried a few doors, "Well, it's not like it's totally hopeless. Sefton's got to leave sometime. We'll just go out with him."

"No, we can't." Something in Leon's voice made Andrew stop and face him. "He never leaves. He never eats, he never drinks, he never sleeps. He just sits at that desk of his and talks."

"What about?"

"The kind of stuff he was dishing out to you. Crazy stuff."

Andrew thought this over for a moment. "How long have you been here?"

Leon shook his head. "I . . . I don't know. My watch stopped working after I got here. But I think it's been a long time." He looked at Andrew. "I keep coming up with explanations, but none of them fit. The best one I've got is that he's an alien running some sort of psychological experiment. I figure he intercepts the Hyrdawaves and grabs us as we're teleporting. Maybe we're

not in the Terminal at all. We might not even be on Earth."

Andrew looked at him askance. "That's your *best* explanation?"

Leon looked embarrassed. "All right, *you* figure it out!"

"I'm sorry, but I just can't buy aliens; that's just science fiction stuff. But . . . Hey! Maybe he's some sort of fifth-generation audio-animatron, you know, like they have on the Disney Satellite?"

Leon looked up in surprise. "I never thought of that.

That would explain it, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe, I don't know. It still doesn't explain wby

we're here, but it might help get us out. If this guy is some sort of machine, than all we've got to do is break him. He's probably monitored, and then somebody'll have to come down and deal with us directly."

"What if they won't let us leave?"

"We'll worry about that when it happens. It's better than standing around here doing nothing, right?" Leon nodded. "So how do we break it?" Andrew paused. "Hmmm. Not a whole lot around

here . . ." His eyes focused on Leon. He snapped his fingers. "Your briefcase! It's one of those zero-G alloy jobs, right? Well we could just bash it with that until—"

"No!" Leon clutched at his briefcase. "Let's use something else!"

"We don't *bave* anything else," Andrew pointed out.
"Look, the ads say that those things are supposed to be able to survive a shuttle explosion. It won't get damaged by bashing a . . . a mannequin apart."

He reached for the briefcase, but Leon stepped back. "Look, what is your problem?" Andrew asked.

Leon giggled. "You wanna know my problem? I'll show you my problem!" He held his briefcase up and, with a flourish, pushed his hand through the case and wiggled his fingers out the other side. "See? I think! I'm going as crazy as Sefton." He backed away from Andrew, flattening himself against the wall. "Everybody he talks to goes crazy. You will too, so just stay away from me!" With that he sank into the wall and vanished.

Andrew stood and stared at the wall for quite some time. $\,$

Feeling dazed, he wandered the corridors. Once or twice he saw Leon in the distance, but the man scuttled away every time he saw him. Eventually, against his better judgement, he found himself once more standing outside Room 106.

Sefton smiled. "Hello, Andrew. How's Leon feeling?" Andrew slowly dropped into the chair. "I think Leon is feeling crazy." He looked at Sefton. "What's wrong with him?"

Sefton nodded sympathetically, "He was a young man, with good health and a bright future. They're usually the ones who have the greatest trouble accepting the fact that they're dead. Luckily, Leon doesn't travel much." Andrew just looked at him. "Dead," he said. A ball fell

Andrew just looked at him. "Dead," he said. A ball fel from the ceiling to the floor. Andrew flinched. Sefton ignored it.

"Afraid so. You see, when the body is disintegrated, it's all over so quickly that occasionally the . . . 'spirit'

doesn't realize that the body's been destroyed. Now this only happens to about a thousandth of the population, thank goodness. As for the rest, I don't know, maybe they just don't care. Anyway, we do know that when it happens, the spirit generated follows the behavior patterns we've come to associate with ghosts. Ghosts like you. Andrew.

"You are crazy," Andrew whispered. "Look, I didn't even get a chance to use the booth. The lines were overloaded. Before the floor opened, a sign lit up and told me to come here."

Sefton shook his head. "That sign lights up every time he booth is activated. Most of the time, there's just no-body there to read it. The drop slide is just the most convenient way to ensure that you get here. If we didn't isolate you, you could've haunted the terminal for months before you had figured out what was wrong."

Andrew stood up. "Tev had enough of this! Who's

your supervisor? I don't know what the hell you're trying to prove with this nonsense. . . ." Sefton's voice cut across Andrew's tirade like a knife.

"Tm trying to tell you what you need to know. You can't go until you realize what has happened."

"Go? Go where? Dallas? I'll go right now!"

"Not Dallas. I don't know where, but I'm pretty sure it's not Dallas." He looked up at Andrew from his chair. "Look, we can settle this once and for all, if you'll indulge me." He jerked a thumb over to the corner. That's what the ball is for, after all."

"How will that prove anything?"

"Just catch the ball. It's hollow, only weighs a kilo or two. If you can catch it, it proves you're not a ghost. Furthermore, to apologize for the inconvenience Tve caused you, Transplanet Teleportation and Telemonitoring will give you a free, six-month, unlimited teleport pass. Deal?"

Andrew thought it over. A ball dropped. "Deal." He walked over and stood under the hole and waited with cupped hands. After a moment he looked over at Sefton. "Can't you speed this thing up? I feel like an idiot."

Sefton shrugged. "The balls are on an automatic system. Do you know anything about ghosts?"

"No more than anybody else. It's been proved they exist, sort of; that's about it."

"Ah, well, to keep it simple, ghosts are caused by two basic circumstances. Do you know what they are?"
"Death and taxes?"

Deam and taxe

"That's a better answer than you think. First we have the classic Task Unfinished In Life." This is where a spirit feels that it has to 'stay on' and fulfill some obligation it incurred while still alive. This is the type of ghost most people are familiar with, but it's fairly uncommon. The other, much more common type, is the ghost that just doesn't know that it's dead Like you."

"Do you seriously think I could *die* and not know it?"

"Many people do," said Sefton. "In their sleep, perhaps, or . . ."

"Hit by a bus?"

Sefton nodded. "Messy, but effective if you don't see it coming. T-booths are tailor-made for the job. Now the unaware ghost will continue its corporeal routine until it finally realizes that it is, in fact, dead. After that, they're free to go on."

"On . . . on to what?"

Dr. Sefton sighed and looked wistfully down the corridor. "No one knows. Once they actually go, they don't come back."

"What makes them realize that they're actually dead?"
"Oh . . . The fact that they can't lift or touch material
objects, most people can't see or hear them, although I
believe that cats can . . . is something wrong?"

Andrew was glaring at him. "So now you're supposed to be a psychic."

Sefton smiled,"Nooo . . . not really."

"Aha! But if Im a ghost, than how can you..." At that moment a ball dropped from the ceiling, and, without pause, passed through Andrew's cupped hands, and disappeared into the hole in the floor.

Andrew spun to face Sefton. "It's a trick! A . . . a hologram! Let me see you try to catch it!"

Sefton slowly shook his head. "No can do, Andrew."

Sefton slowly shook his head. "No can do, Andrew."
He raised his hand and effortlessly passed it through the top of the desk several times. "I'm a ghost. Just like you."

"But . . . but the desk . . . I . . . I touched it. And the chair, I . . ."

"Your hand stopped on the desktop because you expected it to. At first it takes an actual effort to go beyond perceived physical boundaries."

"But I also expected to catch that ball!"

Sefton smiled disarmingly, "Ah, well, you expected to catch a one-kilo ball. As convinced of your solidity as you were, you probably could have generated enough psychokinetic energy to do that. But the ball actually weighs birty kilos. Your ectoplasm couldn't stop that. Try the desk now."

"NO!" Andrew looked at Sefton with panic in his eyes. "You're saying that I'm . . . "

"Dead as a mackerel." Sefton leaned forward and spread his hands, "Andrew, I know what you're feeling. If somebody else had to tell me 'Hey, buddy, you're dead.' I know I'd feel embarrassed."

Andrew blinked, and despite himself, smiled. "This is too weird." He slowly reached forward and touched the desk top, gently ran his finger along it and glanced at Sefton, who nodded encouragingly. He suddenly took a deep breath, pushed—and effortlessly his hand disappeared through the surface. He gasped and jerked it back out. It looked the same as it ever had. He stared at Sefton with whide eyes.

"But . . . but . . .

"It's all right, Andrew." Sefton said gently. "It just means that it's time for you to go."

"You keep saying that! Go where? I don't know where to go!"

"Are you sure?" Sefton said, "Look around."

Andrew looked. The lighting seemed to be changing,

the colors in objects seemed to be slowly draining away, except . . . except in one direction. It was down the corridor. He couldn't quite see it, but it was as if all of the color was flowing to someplace that was just around the corner. He noticed a sound now, not laughter, not music, not quite

Andrew stood transfixed as he felt doors reopening in his mind. He suddenly recognized the sound (how *could* he have forgotten it?): it was the sound of . . .

Andrew turned toward Sefton. "Um . . . I gotta go." Sefton nodded amiably. "They always do."

Andrew stepped out of the office and headed off down the corridor. He suddenly paused and turned back. With what was obviously a great effort, he returned to the office doorway. He looked at Sefton. "Wait a minute... vou

Sefton nodded.

"So what are you hanging around here for? Come on, we'll go together." Sefton smiled. "Thank you, Andrew; I'm touched, re-

ally. But I can't go yet."

"Why not?"

"Remember I told you there are two types of ghosts? I'm the classic type. The one with The Obligation."

Andrew frowned. "Bummer. What's the obligation? If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all. It's to explain to people like you what has happened to them, so that they can get to where they belong as soon as possible."

Andrew stared at him. "Why is that your obligation?" Sefton spread his hands modestly. "Because I'm the one who designed and built the first teleport units some sixty-odd years ago."

Andrew snapped his fingers. "That Dr. Sefton! Wow! It's an honor to meet you. . . . Hey! Wait a minute . . . you're still alive!"

Sefton grinned. "So are you, Andrew."

"Oh." The two men stood and looked at each other.

"Oh," he repeated.

Dr. Sefton waved him out the door, "Don't worry

about me, Andrew. The Front Office has me working on the problem, so I know I'll be along eventually."

The last thing Andrew heard from Sefton before he turned the corner was, "Be seeing you."

Several hours later, somewhere in the basement of the Dallas Teleport terminal, a rumpled Andrew Milson angrily burst into the small office labeled 106.

"What kind of cockamamie refund system is this?!" he

said angrily.

The small grey-haired man seated behind the desk smiled and said, "Now hold on, partner, calm down. I'm Dr. Sefton, and you, let me guess . . . you look like an

Andrew blinked. "Have we met?" ◆

Walk an Alien Mile

Denise Vitola

When it came upon me, I was a long in the meaning that high climb and the solitude of the hemlock forest. The surprise at seeing it sent me for a reel and I tripped over a jut of rock, landing on my backpack and feeling the squish of a banana that I carried. It was one of those UFO aliens, just like you see plastered on the covers of supermarket tabloids, a caricature spacebug with round lidless cychalls and no ears.

I crabwalked away from the monster, fear rocketing my flee. It did not strike up after me, but instead stood stiff-still watching my attempted escape. The thorny vine of a wild rosebush barbed the path and I lurched into it anyway, my denim jacket snagging.

The alien moved slowly toward me and I clutched my breath as it reached out to



gently extract my sleeve from the stickers. It buzzed at me, some sort of weird talk issuing from the round hole that was its mouth, offering as it did a five-fingered paw to help me to a stand. I shook my head at it, shivering and going goosebumped. It shucked its shoulders and moved to have a sit on a fallen tree.

I wrestled to a vertical pitch, trying to talk myself into a sane perspective and fight the inclination to run off screaming for a park ranger. There seemed to be no immediate danger. In fact, the alien looked brittle and a bit broken up and it was wearing a tattered blue uniform that puckered at the elbows and knees.

Here was extraterrestrial contact, and what was I doing but jigging in my shorts, afraid it might blaster me to mist.

It cranked a look in my direction and slid over on the log, making room for me to sit down. Cautiously, I balanced on the end of the tree and watched as it removed its boots and shoved them toward me, pointing at my feet.

What, it wanted to trade shoes? I took its hikers and toed off my own, thinking that when I made a dash for safety and finally found that park ranger, he'd have to believe me when he took a gander at my new spacepeds.

I slipped on the boots and folded the strip fasteners tight around my ankles. They were fur-lined and fashioned from a deep slate gray leather. They snuggled my feet and conformed instantly to my size nines.

I glanced at the alien and tried to smile, but I hesitated, my disquiet over its abrupt appearance on the deserted hiking trail dottering my diplomacy.

The spaceman jabbed a finger down the path. "Walk a mile," I heard in my head. "That's all you will need to understand." It was a voice, bell-ringing clear in my brainpan, and I had the sudden impression that the alien

had hooked into me through the boots!

I stuttered to an upright position, my curiosity edging

my apprehension.

"No harm to you. Don't worry," the voice said.

Turning from the alien, I stepped into a walk, feeling the softness of the shoes.

The woods I paddled through were high up along Lawson's Ridge, and it was one of those moody autumn days when all the light you need comes from the golds and oranges of the leaves. A cold breeze roughed along my cheeks and I opened my eyes wide, letting the air drive tears into my vision. Pine necelles slicked my walk and I skidded down a roll in the land. Just as I scrambled toward the lip of the facing incline, the spaceman's memories started in on me.

I stared at the hard-lined face of Gresa Fron and felt a bubble of anxiety circuit my craw. The Administrator of the planet Thabs olsowly stood up from the sit behind his desk, dark blue robes billowing, the edge of one sleve turned up. He calmly pulled it straight, and the action made me wince.

"Your clan has caused me great disappointment, Bera Yon," Gresa said.

"I have been away, Lord Administrator," I answered,

forging a placating tone. "On Assa. Doing environmental studies to help with the rarefied atmosphere problems here on Thalso."

"Yes. Admirable. Still, it is no excuse for not retaining control over your clan. To be honest, I am shocked by the actions of your first son. I would not have expected it, especially from him."

Kard was to have followed me as Clan Leader, but his shrewd persuasion of my family members had ravaged that possibility. By the Goddess! How could I have let this get so far without noosing the brat? "I can offer no excuses, sir," I said, bowing my head. The action yanked on my upper vertebrae, exciting a pulse of pain. I had taken a tumble during the environmental expedition, injuring my back on a rock.

"I have supported your clan for many years," Gresa said. "Wealth, power, the finest of females with which to mate. I don't understand. Why did Kard turn against me to lead this revolt?"

"The young always want change, lord. He was foolish and his act has cost him everything."

Gresa frowned, one of his eyeballs disappearing in the lining of hide-wrinkles. "I lost as well. He murdered my first wife and three of my offspring. Such crimes cannot go unpunished, even though you and your people have provided the insight to increase our planefs technology. All the inventions in the universe will not undo what Kard has wrought. Such deceit among the High Clans shall not be tolerated."

"I will see to it that his rights to ascend to the position of Clan Leader be rescinded."

"That is not enough. Payment must be exacted from your entire family."

Menace lurked in the wind behind his words and my apprehension rode the blast. Fear and regret lassoed my nerve endings, the stricture so tight around my heart that a sharp pain severed its beating for the measure of a hard-pulled breath. "What is it you will do?" I whispered.

He cut a grin into his baggy face. "Kard will be executed in the public amphitheater, as will all other members of your family. And you, Bera Yon, as Leader, shall carry the burden of responsibility until your natural death. I am giving you a ship, and you will be exiled from Thalso."

I had walked in the boots for a half-mile, and my steps had grown sluggish with each oppressive memory. The trees opened up and I gazed out across a valley. Storm clouds smoked along the far ridge, adding monotone texture to the smutted sky.

Time smoothed by for a few minutes. My emotions stewed up as I scraped in the view, each one clamoring for a reckoning; grief, outrage, and indignation, all bent upon mastering the moment. Bera Yon had found a way to tan into the source of my compassion.

An abrupt irritation came on then, flinting-chipping a jagged edge on my empathy and stalling a slow collapse of my objectivity. Bera Yon's boots held a magic that decoded his story, and by borrowing the pitch and furrow

of my thoughts, the boots sang the tale to me in my

I turned from the overlook to trace my walk back to the alien, sure that he was patiently waiting in the crook of the trail from where I had engaged my hike. His recollections began once more as I crunched off through dead leaves littering the forest floor.

Gresa permitted me to see Kard before his execution. The boy was still holding to his defiance and his stance angered me so I struck him. He staggered with the slap, bouncing against the wall of the detention cell.

"Why did you do that?" he muttered, clutching his jaw.

"I did it because you are an idiot," I growled. "You have dishonored our clan with your childish attempt to wrestle power away from Gresa Fron and your scheming not only brings death to you, but to everyone else in our family."

Kard released the grip on his chin and pulled himself to attention, narrowing his gaze upon me and puffing his chest. "I only tried to do what you should have done," he said. "For years Gresa Fron has coveted the successes of Clan Yon, claiming the brilliance of our people as well as our technological achievements for his own ends. And in all that time, you pandered to him, grateful to scratch up the remainders he tossed back to us. We could have been the most powerful family on Thalso, but for you."

My son turned away, signaling an end to the visit, and when he did, the illusions of my life crumbled. Grief ransacked my anger.

Kard spoke the truth.

I had to stop for a moment, digging for a deep breath. Bera Yon's memories overwhelmed me and I almost yanked off his damned boots, but autumn in the mountains is no place to go for a tromp sockfooted and I didn't want to take a case of nneumonia.

The alien had not correctly calibrated the human sympathy gauge. How such a thing is done, I can't say, but somewhere in the midst of this review it occurred to me. He was popping the fuses on my mood-meter. The reasons for it littered my mind, dashing into the spaces between the emotional swells. I had an image of the alien scanning old UFO reports brought back to Thalso containing encounters with rednecks spotting deer or women who see a likeness of Elwis in the dings on their refrigerator doors. For all his cosmic sophistication, he had slipned one of the knots.

had slipped one of the knots.

I stuttered to a walk once more, squinting when Bera Yon's recital usurped my thoughts.

Gresa Fron was good to his word. The next day I witnessed the execution of my entire clan.

The twin suns, Doga and Trey, sparkled white-hot over the judgment arena. Spectators crowded the oval theater, nibbling at picnic snacks and drinking wine while they waited for the performance to begin. I sat in the box reserved for the Clan Yon, my mind caught in a dwell on the times I had come to the coliseum with my first wife to watch parades and gladiatorials.

Local officials yammered speeches and political tributes and my shame and agony festered. I hurched to my feet after the fifth speaker denounced my family, yelling obscenities that did little but gain me a cuff from one of my escorts. A sixth and seventh orator swept applause from the crowd and then, mercfully, the drums sounded the start of the execution.

The members of my clan were marched around the theater for a final inspection before being garroted to the stakes puncturing the dirt floor of the arena. I can still hear their screams as the tinder stacked around the poles was ignited.

Kard did not look at me once.

I was almost back to the path. Bera Yon's guilt had buttoned itself to my shirt pocket, and it felt like I toted the weight of a neutron star. This old boy was ladling on the emotional intensity like my grandma would load up my plate for Sunday dinner. Too much pepper and a whole lot of grease.

I dragged toward the incline leading to the trail.

The space shuttle I was given by Gresa Fron was a rattletrap. Rusted, dented, and torn it was, and the interior atarmosphere stung my nostrils; the filters on the environmental units clogged with dirt and sludge. There were scartly provisions in the galley's cold box and a hard, short bunk squeezed between instrument panels that looked to be scavenged from an era before Dona Kevy became emperor. I flicked the master switch and watched the transformers heat. Lights dithered and blinked and I sat down on the cracked leather seat of the conning chair.

I fled Thalso willingly, making a brief stop on Assa, where I tried to paste together junkyard parts for shuttle repairs. The folks there knew me to be a good person, and they supplied me with food and sympathy. They even asked me to stay, but I did not.

For three years I tramped, chancing a landing here and there to gather rations and barrer services for fuel. It is surprising how many places required the mechanical genits I could offer. The technology of Thabso is well known on some of the worlds, and my knowledge glued up many an ailing invention and sealed new friendships, but I am a self-righteous marry; it is a thing I freely admit. I leave the company of others to be alone in the deeps of space, where I can suckle my remorse uninhibited.

Two months after leaving Pinon-tho, my shuttle sustained a meteor hit while I was passing through the Clutter Fields of Sector Seven. The port stabilizer ripped clear away and the damage caused me to ditch on a small planet clinging to the curb of the quadrant.

When it happened, I had been snoozing on the bunk, trusting the ship to autopilot and trying to ignore the gnaw of my stomach. For five days the food locker had been empty; I was living on brackish water and the hope of finding a nice spot to touchdown for reprovisioning.

The meteor collision tossed me from the hammock.

Walk an Alien Mile 65

and for a few seconds I was confused as to the cause. The shuttle jerked and I flew with it, scudding across the deck and banging to a halt against the navicomputer. I fought to right myself, clawing for a hold along the dash of the helm console, but the ship was in a careen and the artificial gravity slugged at my attempts. Dizzy and struggling with the spin of the shuttle and the club of the stress forces, I finally managed to fumble upon the pitch control. After I repealed the drag and balanced the craft, I crawled to the head and vomited burning water, praying that it all held straight until I could clear my nose and eves.

Bera Yon waited by the trail and watched me in silence as I sat down on the log to remove his boots. Rain pattered off the leaves and there was a distant rumble of thunder. The breeze slacked to a sigh. I pulled on my own shoes.

He had dumped his disabled ship over on the next ridge, camouflaging it with branches and leaves. That would not be a good conceal for long. Come spring the trail would be loaded with weekend campers, curious mountain bikers, and Boy Scouts trying to earn their merit badges. Bera Yon needed me to scrounge parts and to help him build a stabilizer.

The allen's appeal for assistance to relieve his predicament was indeed creative. After my trek in his boots, I felt that I did understand Bera Yon. He was a galactic husdler in a faded spacesuit, a lightspeed bum on the take. His idea was to forest my compassion, but his technique was so heavily dolloped with his rage that not only did he charge the necessary human biochemicals, he managed to badger my waffling sympathy until mistrust eitsioned from the emotion.

Anger suddenly dusted my perspective. Hard-luck stories come from every inhabited planet in the cosmos, it would seem, as do the chumps who listen to them.

I gave Bera Yon the boots with a slow shake to my head and turned off down the trail, feeling his stare settle on my back as I hurried away.



Interview With Isaac Asimov

Conducted by George Zebrowski

I first met Isaac Asimov at the World Science Fiction Convention of 1963, held in Washington, D.C. I had seen him at various gatherings since 1960, but had not had the courage to approach him. Now, not quite eighteen, I was so overwhelmed by my recent reading of *The Foundation Trilogy* that I stumbled over my words as I shook his hand.

"Er, would . . . you ask me a question?" I asked, inadvertently baring the ego of a would-be writer.

"Of course!" he shouted at once, delighted by the opening I had given him. "What would you like me to ask you?"

I went red and my knees shook, and he seemed to enjoy my consternation mightily. I had expected to meet the austere Harf Seldon and to feet the exhilaration of reason that was for me the great distinguishing feature of Asimov's work; I had not expected to meet an ebullient Harf Seldon. A moment passed, I felt relieved, and a bit flattered, when Isaac's knowing smile turned into a kindly gaze.

In the following year I passed my high school science Regents exams by reading *The Intelligent Man's Guide to Science* a few nights before the tests—and nothing else.

Seven or so years later I attended a Philcon. I'd sold a few short stories. I came across Isaac, now a colleague, as he stood before a wallsized hotel mirror.

"Do you believe it?" he asked loudly. "That figure in the mirror is



Photo by Jay Kay Klein

forty-eight years old!" I didn't know what to say.

Some years later, when Isaac had won his first Nebula Award, for *The Gods Themselves*, he called to me across the emptying banquet hall. Startled, I waited for him to approach. "This is it—the end, George," he

said.

"What do you mean?" I replied. He held up his award trophy. "I've reached the top,"

"I'm sure you'll win another," I said. My words did not seem to cheer him as he wandered away. In time I learned what a quagmire human nature and human history are, but it still seems to me that we need the exhibitation of reason to cut through to better circumstances for our kind; I must confess that it saddens me how few of my fellow humans have this feeling for reason, but then even Hari Seldon must have had his despaining moments.

In 1990, the chance was given to me to interview Isaac Asimov, the greater personality in whom Hari Seddon inheres, and I agreed instantly. The year before I had written a story, "Foundation's Conscience," for Foundation's Friends. Stories in Honor of Isaac Asimov, edited by Martin H. Greenberg, My story started with the words, "My search for Hari Seldon began in 1056 F.E." And that is something of the mood with which I began this interview. Was it possible to make a fresh search for Isaac Asimov, to ask him what no one had ever asked? I was determined to find out as I presented my questions by mail and phone, and finally in person.

Now that he is gone, I realize that I knew Isaac for nearly thirty years, and he was my friend and colleague for the second half of that time. A harsh word never passed between us. The door of his home was always open to me, and I wish that I had taken up his standing invitation more often. In the '80s, when a publisher had mistreated me, Isaac immediately went to my defense. He did not waste a single moment, and his help was effective; and he gave me his help even as his health was failing. When I went to see my friend on St. Valentine's Day, 1991. to complete this interview, I was shaken by his declining health. Isaac put on a brave face as he answered my final queries. He paused to answer the phone several times during our conversation, and each time, despite his obvious discomfort, his voice was clear and strong, his words rational—the voice of the father figure (Hari Seldon himself), who helped me to think for myself and become the writer I am. One thing is certain: he will always be with us, because he wrote so much that I will be reading him for the rest of my life. and for that I am grateful. Goodbye, Isaac, but only for the moment,

George Zebrowski: I'd like to ask you what your deepest feelings were when you first started to write. What did you wish for most from the effort? How did you imagine it would be? Isaac Asimov: When I first started

to write (at the age of eleven), I had only the feeling that I wanted to write, I didn't know why. I just wanted to make up a story. By the time I was eighteen, I had

By the time I was eighteen, I has gotten to a new stage. I wanted to see my story in print, with my name on it. That was all I dreamed of, to see my name in Astounding. The thought of money never entered into it. Seeing my name was great—all I thought it would be, and when money arrived also, it turned out to be welcome because I needed money for college.

After that it was just a matter of trying to do better-and better-GZ: Was it true that behind this initial desire to see your work in print there existed a deep love of the science fiction you read in boyhood and the impulse to add to its beauties with work of your own? And could you tell us which works of the 1930s most impressed you? IA: Yes, I was an ardent reader of science fiction from the age of nine. From 1929 to 1938 I read every scrap of science fiction I could lay my hands on. As for my favorite stories of the period, they appear in my anthology Before the Golden Age. Among the novels I particularly

Among the novels I particularly loved were Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Space* and *The Cometeers*, all of E. E. Smith, particularly *Galactic Patrol*, Edmond Hamilton's *The Universe Wreckers*.

Once I started publishing science fiction it became more of a business for me and I could no longer love it with the wild abandon of my younger days—perhaps because that kind of wild abandon is only to be found in younger days.

GZ: Which of your own works do

you like most? Could you answer this in each category—short fiction, novels, and especially non-fiction? IA: Short fiction: My favorite story is "The Last Question," which was first published in Science Fiction Quarterly in 1956. Novels: My favorite novel is The

Gods Themselves, published by Doubleday in 1972. It won the Hugo and the Nebula but that's not why it's my favorite.

Non-fiction: My favorite non-fic-

tion books are my various autobiographies: In Memory Yet Green (Doubleday, 1979); In Joy Still Felt (Doubleday, 1980); and one that is forthcoming.

67. Why then is The Gods Them-

GZ: Why, then, is The Gods Themselves your favorite novel? IA: Because when I reread it (as I did recently) I cannot help but notice that I was writing over my head, especially in the second part. It seemed to me that my writing was better and more skillful than usual, Just luck, I suppose, for I don't remember working on it any differently from the way I worked on my other novels.

I admit that in the second part I was meeting a "dare." Because I avoid sex in my novels and extraterestrials, I have heard it said that I couldn't handle either. I was determined to show those who said so that they were quite wrong. In the second part I dealt with extraterestrials that were really different, and it dealt only with sex. Every time I think of the book I think with satisfaction of having showed those who underestimated me that they shouldn't.

GZ: Many of my colleagues share my opinion that The Gods Themselves is one of your best works, because it is modern in technique, filled with original ideas and touches provocatively on issues of science and government. We also include The Caves of Steel. The Naked Sun. The End of Eternity, and in short fiction "The Dead Past," "The Ugly Little Boy," and "The Martian Way." The author of these works speaks in a gracefully lucid and sophisticated voice. Yet you have on various occasions, most recently in your "Author's Note" to your new novel, Nemesis, renounced "artistry," so-called, I say so-called, because I don't believe you to be against genuine artistry, but only against the pretentious kind. It seems to me that the writer whose works Anthony Burgess has described as "no easy fripperies for a loose-enda evening: they demand concentration as Henry James demands it" has been unfair to his own accomplishments. IA: I renounce any claim to "artistry" simply because I don't sweat over my books. I write them as quickly as I can and I never look back, I don't polish and I don't revise except where necessary to correct actual errors. In order to do this, I deliberately write in as simple and straightforward a manner as possible, eschewing all fanciness.

Maybe what I mean by "artistry" is "fanciness." Maybe there is art to plain writing, but if there is, I put it in on the unconscious level—never deliberately.

I have been accused by critics of having "no style," but I pay no attention to that. What they mean is no "fanciness," and that's very true. The only difference is that they think I ought to have some and I don't. GZ: I'd like to widen our discussion. If I may. In a recent editorial in Asimov's, you expressed astonishment that Robert A. Heinlein could have had so much trouble with editors and publishers during his career. I'd like to ask you why you were astonished. As an observer of the publishing scene for many years, surely you've noticed that the regard in which a writer is held doesn't always carry over to how an editor or publisher treats that writer. Greg Bear has observed that SF tends to eat and spit out many of its best. What did you think of the issues I raised in my review of Heinlein's letters. Grumbles from the Grave?

IA: Since this is Rosh Hashonah (the Jewish New Year) let me quote a story from the Bible. You will find it in 2 Chronicles 1: 7-12:

"In that night did God appear unto Solomon, and said unto him, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon said unto God Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great.

"And God said to Solomon, Because this was in thine heart, and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honour, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet has asked long life; but has asked wisdom and knowledge for thyself, that thou mayest judge my people . . .

"Wisdom and knowledge is granted unto thee; and I will give thee riches, and wealth, and honor . . ."

Well, the following did *not* happen but if it could have happened, this is what would have happened. "Fifty years ago God appeared to

Conducted by George Zebrowski

me and said, Ask what I shall give thee. And Isaac said to God . . . Give me now the desire to

... Give me now the desire to write and the gift of being published. It is all I want.

"And God said to Isaac, Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked for riches, wealth or honour, or large advances, or great promotion, or long life, the desire to write and the gift of being published is granted to you, and I will give you riches, and wealth, and honour, and large advances, and promotion and long life."

And that's it, George. I have made a deal with every publisher I have, especially Doubleday, and it is just this. They publish everything I give them to publish, and I won't ask for any large advances—or any advance at all if necessary—or ask questions about sales—or make demands about promotion—or want special treatment.

And, as a result, Doubleday has published 113 of my books, including large numbers of books of essays, and annotations of the Bible, of Shakespeare, of Gilbert and Sullivan and so on. They have never rejected a book (except once, come to think of it, to their regret) and have never seriously fooled around with anything I have written. And they give me advances that are larger than I want and they recycle and reprint my books endlessly and treat me always as a favored child-and all because I don't ask for anything but publication.

This holds true for my other publishers, too. One of them said to me once, "You're our best author, but what is amazing is that you're our nicest author, too. Those two things never go together."

So it was a great discovery I made, and I'm not selfish. I give it to all of you freely. Nice guys finish first.

As for Robert Heinlein, there is no question but that he was more highly regarded than I as a science fiction writer (only as a science fiction writer) and undoubtedly made more money than I did, but no one can read Grambles without seeing that he was an unhappy man, while

no one can read my two-volume autobiography without seeing that I was a happy one.

Bob was unhappy obecause he had a highly developed sense of behad a highly developed sense of being cheated by every editor he dealt with, and I suspect that most writers feel the same way (with varying degrees of justification for all I know). I have no such sense. I always assume that an editor is on my side. If I make money, he makes money and vice versa, and as far as I know, this has worked.

Your description of Heinlein in your review of Grumbles I don't recognize except for his suggestion that you support Jeane Kirkpatrick for Vice President in 1988. She would make even Quayle look good.

It is nossible that this answer may

be used as "evidence" that I have a

colossal ego, but the hell with it. I'm too old and too secure to give a damn what anyone says.

GZ: Which SF writers of recent decades, say since 1965, have you found worthy, or enjoyable? Which writers have you disliked? Or, more generally, what trends in SF have you disapproved of?

La Forgive ne, George, but it is impossible for me to answer the first part of this question. I don't like to

judge my colleagues: first, because it

don't consider myself qualified to do

isn't fair, and, second, because I

A trend in science fiction that I disapprove of is the increasing tendency to write Tolkien imitations. None of them are within a light-year of Tolkien and they squeeze *real* science fiction into a narrower com-

GZ: What non-fictional scientific works have you admired over the years?

IA: I was very fond of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* by Rhodes. I also go for any book on science by Martin Gardner, L. Sprague de Camp, Stephen Jay Gould, Paul Davies, or Timothy Ferris.

GZ: Which works of fiction, not SF, have you admired over the years? IA: I'm a great reader of Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, and Agatha Christie. I've read everything they're written over and

over again, and I don't intend ever to stop rereading them.

GZ: Your new novel, *Nemests*, is your first book in some time that does not belong to a series. What moved you to write it?

IA: I was moved to write it by my Doubleday editor, Jennifer Brehl, who ordered me to write a book that was not part of any series. So I did, just to show her that I could.

GZ: What are you working on now?
What other works of fiction do you have planned? Is there a book entitled Foundation and Eternity somewhere sheet?

La: The novel I am working on now is Forward the Foundation. Again, its details are following an order by Jennifer Brehl. She wanted a Foundation novel, which, like the first three, was not unitary. For that reason I said that I would write it as five interconnected novellas. I have completed two and am working on the third. It is very hard to do—five separate plots, which advance the overall plot. One of these years I've got to stop accepting challenges just to show off.

GZ: As a final question to this interview, what would you have liked for me to ask that I did not?

IA: I don't think you have asked me

if I have had a happy life as a writer. The answer is:

You betcha

Tm approaching the end of my life now but as I look back on it, it has been filled with the excitement and drama and satisfaction of writing. I have done almost nothing elsenbaven't traveled, haven't thrown parties, haven't had "fun"—just sat at the tyrewriter and worked.

Do I regret it now? Never

All I have is this vague feeling that I would like to start all over again and this time write more and on more different subjects. I regret the small bits of my life in which I didn't write and which I wasted.

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About the Authors

Thomas M. Disch does a superb job of upstaging this feature in his miniautobiography "My Life as a Child." the first part of which leads off the special section in this issue celebrating the 30th anniversary of his initial appearance in print. As a result, there's not a lot more that needs to be said about Tom. We'll simply add that "A Troll of Surewould Forest" is one of the zaniest and funniest pieces of writing that has ever showed up between the covers of this magazine-and "Descending" is a prime example of something that lies at the other end of the Dischian spectrum. We're pleased to present both stories, starting here and continuing with the other two installments of "Troll" in our next two issues

The last time we quoted James Alan Gardner, he was promising that he would never. ever write a story about black holes. Shortly thereafter. "Kent State Descending the Gravity Well" showed up in our mailbox. First we bought the story-and then we gently chided Jim for breaking his promise. To which he responded. "Can Largue that it was a story about the mathematics of black holes rather than black holes themselves?" And he immediately answered his own question by adding. "I suppose a writer should never say never." Okay, then we'll say it: You've never read a story like this one before. . . .

After making his debut in the third writers of the future anthology, J. R. Dunn has gone on to demonstrate that, for him, the future is now. He has published several short stories in 0mil, and his only other appearance in this magazine ("Stour Hearts," March 1990) earned a spot on the preliminary Nebula Award ballot.

Robert A. Metzger is a familiar name to readers of Aboriginal SF, where a dozen of his stories have appeared. "Behind," his first story for us, is a certifiably amazing piece of work that gave us a chance to do something a little different with the illus-

tration. Do *not* peek ahead at the end of this story, or we won't be responsible for the consequences.

A. I. Sirois makes a return appearance (following "Ex Cathedra," September 1991) with "Three-Body Problem," which he informs us is part of a future history series he's been working on for about 20 years—beginning with his first published story, "War Baby," back in the May 1974 issue of Fatnastic.

Susan Wade maintains a physical existence in Austin, Texas, but prefers to give her address in the form of BBS signatures, because she spends a lot of time lurking in the SF Roundtable on GEnie in her alter ego of "S.WADE1." Among the members of her writers' group, she has a reputation for being obsessed with the nature of memory-which obviously has a lot to do with how "Living in Memory" came to be created. It's her first appearance in this magazine, in a career that's beginning to move into high gear; she has recently made sales to Pulbhouse and to the upcoming anthology Snow White Blood Red

Ever on the lookout for a way to save a little time, we decided to close two deals with a single phone call by telling **Phil Foglio** that not only did we want to publish "After-Image," we wanted him to do the libustration for it. This tricky little story happens to have been written by one of the most well-known artists in the comic industry, so it made <code>l</code> perfect sense to have Phil provide both pieces of the package.

Denise Vitola is our latest addition to the list of writers who have made their professional debut in AMAZING* Stories. But actually, "Walk an Alien Mile" is her second sale. Shortly before we bought this story, she found out that TSR Books wanted to publish her novel, Half-Light, If this story makes you want to read more of her work, look for the book, which is coming out in December. •

Nature's Greatest Hits

Gregory Benford

My son once asked me about illness, and since we were watching a base-ball game, conversation veered to Lou Gehrig's disease. "I don't understand," my eight-year-old said. "Lou Gehrig died of Lou Gehrig's disease?" I nodded. My son frowned. "Couldn't he . . . well . . . see it coming?"

Well, sometimes you can't. Which causes me to note the return of an old, fascinating notion, around which hangs a tale.

In the late 1970s there blossomed a mini-genre of what my friend Bill Rotsler termed "Big Rock Hits Earth" novels.

Bill and I had begun work on an idea I first used around 1970, for a short story called "Icarus Descending," and later incorporated into a novel, In the Ocean of Night. But partway through the novel Bill and I planned, we learned that two of our friends were nearly finished with Lucifer's Hammer, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle were using the idea because their editor, Bob Gleason, asked them to tone down a planned novel about alien invasion. Gleason liked the idea of demolishing civilization by dropping an asteroid on the Earth, and wanted them to separate it from the invasion plot.

The notion wasn't new, of course. It seems to have emerged in the 1950s as a subject tossed about for fun and games in science fiction. The striking photos from our planetary survey craft of the 1960s and 1970s underlined how many bodies in the inner solar system were riddled with impact craters—Mercury, Mars, of course our moon, and the moons of Jupiter as well. Meteor bombardment was once quite common, and

daily these bits of debris from the early solar system smash into some larger target. Each day about a hundred tons of small particles, mostly ice. falls into our own atmosphere

I became involved with the idea of meteor impact as a threat in the 1960s, spurred by J. E. Enever's "Giant Meteor Impact" in the March 1966 Analog. Then the theme surfaced for me again in roundabout fashion, through a film deal which eventually aborted. I was asked to look into plotting a script around the prospect of an imminent cometary impact, its effects on society, etc. This led through the rude labyrinths of Hollwwood.

Some products of that collision were Sean Connery's worst movie by far, Meteor—a distant descendant of those preliminary ruminations—and finally the novel with William Rotsler, Shiva Descending, Because of absurd delays after we turned in our manuscript, our novel appeared after Lucifer's Hammer Most of the writing was Bill's, with most of the science from me. Whereas most 'Big Rock' books are disaster novels, this one, we resolved, would be about averting disaster—at a price.

In the decade since, science has seen a paradigm shift about this subject. In the science-fiction community we had customarily taken asteroid impacts as significant. I used the late 1960s MIT Project Icarus study for technical calculations—a compact little manual born in a special topics course for the ever-inventive MIT degraduates, many of them Sf fans.

But mainstream scientists knew little of such matters. Now, though, most believe that a ten-kilometer-asteroid killed the dinosaurs. The revolution came from a thin sliver of the element inclum found wordwide, buried in fossil-bearing sedimentary rocks laid down 65 million years ago. Iridium is rare on the Earth's surface, but more common in asteroids. The layer plainty pointed to an asteroid strike large enough to scatter iridium-tinged dust around the globe. Such an impact would touch off a nightmare of storms, sunamis, bitterly cold clarkness, acid rains, global fires, and eventually maybe even greenhouse warmine.

The iridium layer lies exactly at the point in the fossil record where the lovable lizards died. No rival theories of dinosaur estinction have nearly as much experimental evidence—including a hypothetical outburst of vulcanism, which could pump iridium-rich ore from the earth's metallic core. See Scientific American, October 1990, for another round in the continuing battle.)

Iridium concentrations found in the U.S. and Latin America are thicker, strongly suggesting that the killer probably struck between Cuba and Panama, blasting a hundred-mile-wide crater in the ocean. A sea impact is worse than one on land, contrary to intuition. The jet of steam spikes up to the very edge of our atmosphere, then cloaks the planet in clouds for longer, plunging temperatures farther and faister. The immediate blast effects are worse, too. It looks as though the American dinosaurs died first—within hours, in fact.

What's more, a further stunning bit of data startled the world in 1984: mass extinctions were periodic, coming every 32 million years. This implies that a dim, unrecognized companion star orbiting our sun may scramble up the orbits in the comet cloud beyond Pluto, sending them crashing into the inner planets. This as-yet unfound star was quickly dubbed "Nemesis." Niven and Pournelle used a similar agency to start their plot rolling. Luckliy, the next comet storm seems to lie about 15 million years in the future.

All this is heady stuff, but a more obvious danger lurks in the asteroids already circling the sun in the realm of the inner planets—especially the Apollo asteroids which cross our orbit. In 1978, when Rotsler and I went inshing the book, both the indium discovery and Nemesis were years away—so I opted for the Apollo explanation. It seemed a remote possibility.

Since then, patient observers have picked out many more Apollo asterioids. Now they need not work from thin, scratchlike signatures on photographic plates. New devices called charge-coupled detectors can sniff out dim dots of light and computer-compare them with images from a hour earlier, looking for traces of motion. Since they're near us and moving at about 7 miles a second, even small asteroids of a mile or so across can stand out.

We have found about 200 near-Earth asteroids, adding another two or three a month. From estimates of how much of the night sky we've scrutinized, we can judge that about ten thousand whirl around in the space near us—and thus are candidates for a fateful crossing of their paths and our.

These are a handy scientific resource, in a way, because in terms of energy needed to get there they are the simplest and cheapest missions we could fly which would return a sample. NASA estimates that for 150 million dollars we could get a kilogram or so back to study from one of the big rocks now looping seedately in and out of our orbit. This would be much easier than going all the way to the asteroid belt for a sample, over twice as far from the sun as Farth.

Yet the sample would be of an asteroid, for the near-Earth vagrants are fugitives from the great belt of asteroids which hangs between Mars and Jupiter. The tidal interference of Jupiter stopped them from coalescing into a planet long ago. The nearest they got was Ceres, the largest asteroid, 933 kilometers across. Now any of the many millions of roughly mile-wide asteroids can smack into each other, resulting in chunky debris or even a coagulated, more massive body-bound on a fresh orbit, one that could strike an inner planet. We can calculate that the lifetime of such asteroids which wander into the inner solar system is fairly short; about one percent of the solar system's age. or 45 million years. They end up contributing to the mass of the inner worlds, including ours.

About every century a meteor delivers an impact comparable to a nuclear warhead somewhere on Earth. The most recent, on June 30, 1906. Fell near the Tunguska River in Siberia. It apparently was mostly ice, because it vaporized with an immense bang sensed by weather equipment in London, but leaving little iron or stone as evidence.

In 1972 something came as close as you can get without hitting us. It skipped across the upper atmosphere above the U.S., a bright trail picked up on radar. It had to be at least 80 feet across to make such a trail, skimning like a flat rock spun across a pond by a cosmic child—then gone. Since then, there have been two other recorded near misses. Those two were known objects, making calculated passes, missing the Earth by a few hours of orbital time.

And 99 percent of the near-Earth rocks at least half a kilometer in size we haven't even found. . . .

In 1991 this prompted several astronomers to call for a worldwide program to defend against these intruders. Their logic was simple. Even a rock half a kilometer in diameter would hit with energy equal to a thousand megatons of TNT—far greater than any nuclear weapon. If a bigger chunk hit us square on, it would destroy civilization, perhaps end the human species.

Think of it like an insurance agent would. A big hit would kill about 5 billion people. Say the probability of this happening is once in fifty million years—a reasonable estimate, longer than the Nemesis time. (Asteroid astronomers say a big hit occurs every 25 to 50 million years, avenging over the last billion years of Earth's bombardment.) Then the death rate averaged over that whole time is about a hundred people per year.

Of course, you must be careful handling averages. I'm reminded of the doctor who told his patient that he had both good and bad news. The patient asked for the bad news first. "You have a disease which kills nine out of ten people who get it," the doctor said. "My God! Whar's the good news?" well, my last nine patients with this disease all died." Some people seem to get outraged

some people seem to get outraged at the mere use of statistics, as if to quantify human matters is to rob them of meaning. Still, to get an idea of what risks are worth worrying about, consider our present policies. How much money does this society spend to prevent a hundred deaths?

In health programs funded in the Third World, saving a single life costs about \$200. Mostly this just considers the price of avoiding malnutrition. Cancer screening in advanced nations, though, takes \$75,000 to find an early cancer and stop lis growth, extending a life for at least five more years. (Think about the implications of these last two numbers!)

Highway safety agencies in the U.S. spend about \$120,000 to save a life, building better highway dividers, easier on-ramps and the like. Air pollution control costs roughly a million dollars to avoid one case of deadly lung disease. Eliminating natural radioactivity in drinking water would cost \$5 million per life saved -which is why we don't do it. For nuclear plant safety, we spend \$2.5 billion per life. (Hard to believe, ves. The Soviets spent far, far less and they got Chernobyl-which has killed about 50 people directly so far, and promises to kill thousands over the next few decades. But in the U.S. there hasn't yet been a single bystander death from nuclear power. The estimated death rate from breathing the fumes of oil and coalfired power plants, though, is about

10,000 nationally. That's a major cost in the air pollution expense above.)

If we take that first and smallest number, \$200, as our budget, then we can reasonably spend \$20,000 a year to save that average death rate of a hundred lives per year from meteor collisions. This is a rather rarefied argument, of course, spreading the kill rate from one big hit over 50 million years-mathematically interesting, perhaps, but lacking in human scale. Taking the cancer screening level of spending, we would get \$7.5 million per year-far more than enough to find all the Apollos in a decade or two, and track them well enough to see if we're in any danger.

Ah, but suppose we are? Then an investment of about \$50 million a year would provide a stand-by capability of knocking out the intruder, even if the warning only gives us a matter of weeks to act. It would be much less expensive if we ended up having a year's warning.

By historical accident, we have already spent a trillion dollars developing the instruments which can kill an asteroid—the hydrogen bomb and the liquid chemical rocket. Actually, their simultaneous appearance is no accident—the rocket was pushed strongly after the massive war which introduced nuclear explosives. They were made for each other, and their fateful wedding has sealed the strategic standoff which has made our time tense but strangely peaceful, compared to the half-century before it.

Rendezvous an unmanned vessel with the offending rock, placing a warhead (or several) next to it—and set it off with a remote command. Reduced to chunks a few meters across, the killer becomes a mere spectacular amusement. When it hits our upper atmosphere, the cloud of debris will make a brilliant meteor shower, streamers burning in blues and yellows, flashing orange and gold for many minutes.

We have to be careful when slinging nuclear devices around, of course. We might have little warning of a suspect intruder. That would mean trying to hit the incoming rock in the last few hours of its approach.

But surely that is unacceptable. A dud device could mean we fail to

destroy the target. Even if we did, there would be a high cost for an explosion which did not touch our fragile atmosphere at all. We have billions of dollars worth of orbiting servants-mostly communications satellites-that a nuclear blast would kill. Not through the shock wave, but through an effect we discovered in the late 1950s. The Argus experiments of that era set off hydrogen warheads in space over the south Pacific, Within minutes, swarms of electrons lit up the auroral regions at both poles. Satellites went off the air, permanently silenced.

The reason was simple—in hindsight. A nuclear device makes a plasma cloud of ionized matter. Electrons, liberated from their peaceful atoms, streak away. They infest the metallic satellites, swamping their electronics gear. They race along the earth's magnetic field, concentrating at the poles and lighting up the high atmosphere with their energies. A nuclear explosion these days would destroy a fortune in satellites, and worse, shut down the vast net of communications we have built up.

So we can't bit an incoming rock anywhere in the vast zone dominated by the earli's magnetic field. This region, called the magnetosphere, extends about ten times the earth's radius into space, roughly a tenth of the way to the moon. We would have to block the intruder somewhere beyond that—the farther, the better—so that the nuclear debris will be blown outward by the solar wind, away from Earth and ultimately into the realm beyond the solar system.

In turn, that requires a good idea of where the candidate intruders are, and how they move. NASA is slowly starting to develop high-frequency radar and other techniques which can yield this information.

Saving the world for a hundred million dollars—rather a bargain, 1 think. And a few million for finding the candidate rocks isn't beyond our means. True, the odds of a thousand-megaton impact occurring right away are small—one hits about every ten thousand years. There has been none in recorded history, which co-incidentally is a span of about ten thousand years. Of course, an im-

pact in, say, the Pacific Ocean might not have excited enough interest in ancient Babylon to have merited being inscribed in mud tablets—or tablets might be lost by now. Such events are random, of course, so the odds of their happening in a given year don't get higher if you go a long spell without one—as we have.

But the threat is always there.
Recently a NASA committee urged spending a million or two to at least find some potential planet-killers, using existing telescopes and staff.

They'll have a hard path to cut. I suspect they'll be ignored. Conventional astronomers have already accused them of running a con on the public to get more research dollars for their pet area.

Too bad, say I. Into the bargain we would get a detailed inventery of possible resources open to us in the inner solar system. The first thing Thomas Jefferson did upon acquiring the Louisiana Purchase was send Lewis and Clark out to see what we had. We should be doing the same, taking the long view.

Within a century, I believe the inner solar system will begin to yield up its resources. It will have to, I cannot see how we can sustain a technological society in this thin, rather delicate biosphere, if we keep mining and smelting and burning as we have. In the long run, only a practice of doing the dirty jobs of resource extraction outside the biosphere will make sense. Metals, the crucial ingredient in modern technologies, are getting harder and harder to scrape out of the crust of our Earth.

Far better, then, to mine a tumbling mountain for iron, manganese or platinum, than to blow it to smithereens.

Defending ourselves would also provide a real use for all the rockets and warheads we've built, hoping never to use. But the larger issue is our grand responsibility.

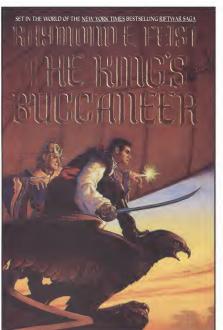
For we would be defending the entire ecosphere, not just ourselves—and we are, like it or not, the sole stewards of our world, in all its rich abundance. The dinosaurs were once, too . . . but look what happened to them.

Looking Forward:

The King's Buccaneer

by Raymond E. Feist

Coming in November 1992 from Doubleday Books



Cover art by Don Maitz

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

For people who enjoy realistic, full-flavored fantasy, a new Ray Feist novel is an occasion to celebrate. *The King's Buccaneer* is his latest, and perhaps one of his best—an elaborate word-pitcure painted with a full pallette of interesting places, people, and situations.

In this novel a Midkemian prince named Nicholas attempts to rescue two friends captured by raiders, and in the process encounters a much larger plot. This excerpt describes the events leading up to the kidnapping, and then the abduction itself

The sentry leaned out of the tower. Something was moving across the water into the harbor mouth. His station at the top of Longpoint lighthouse was the most vital post in the Duchy, as Crydee was more vulnerable from the sea than from any other quarter, a lesson hard learned during the Riffwar. The Tsurani had burned half the village with fewer than thirty men.

Then he saw: six low shapes gliding across the water. Each shallow boat was rowed by a dozen men, with another dozen standling in the middle, armed and ready.

The soldier had orders to toss a pot of special powder on the fire that would turn the flames bright red; then he was to strike the gong. Reivers were entering the harbor! As he turned, a line snapped out, weighted at one end, and before he could take another step, his neck was broken.

The assassin had concealed himself beneath the window of the tower. crouching low upon a support beam, barely two inches of which protruded beyond the stone. He quickly pulled himself into the window and removed the metal hooks he had used to climb the wall by embedding their points in the mortar between the stones. He hurried down the winding stairs, killing two more guards along the way. Three men served each night in the tower, with another three in a small guard shack at the base. As he reached the shack, the assassin saw three bodies slumped over a table, while a pair of black-clad forms moved away. He quickly overtook them, and the three killers hurried along the causeway of land called Longpoint that led from the town to the lighthouse. One of the black-garbed killers glanced toward the harbor. Another dozen pinnaces followed the first six, and the raid would soon begin in earnest. Still no alarm sounded, and all was proceeding as planned.

Longpoint broadened, with a low dock on one side and shops and storage buildings on the other. Silent ships rested alongside the quay, with half-alert sentries dozing upon their quarterdecks. A door opened as the three assassins passed, and the last patron of a dockside inn stumbled out. He was dead before he took two steps, as was the innkeeper who had shown him the door. One of the three killers glanced through the door, and the innkeeper's wife died from an expertly thrown knife before she realized it was a stranger in the doorway instead of her husband.

They would fire the docks and destroy the ships at anchor, but not yet. It would alert the castle, and if the raid was to succeed, the garrison must not be roused until after the keep gates were opened.

The three killers reached the main docks. They passed one last ship in its berth and saw movement at the bow. One assassin drew back a throwing knife, ready to kill any who might give alarm too soon, but a familiar black-clad figure waved once, and climbed over the rail, shinnying down the bowline to join his three companions. The guards on that ship were now all dead. They continued south along the docks, to where they found the small boats pulling in. Two other blackgarbed men waited. They kept their distance from the armed men who now silently climbed up from the shallow boats tied off below. This was a murderous crew. men of no loyalty and one goal: killing and booty. The six men in black felt no kinship with these brigands.

But even these hardened men stepped away in dread to clear a path for the hooded and robed figure who climbed up from the last boat. He motioned toward the castle, and the six dark assassins sped up the road toward the keep. Their task was to climb the walls and open the gates. All other considerations were to wait for the breach of the final defense of Crydee.

The robed man beckoned and a small group stepped away from the main force. This band he had picked to be the first through the gate. They were the men he judged most likely to keep their wits and follow orders during the first frenzied moments of combat. But to drive home their instructions, he said, "Remember your orders. If any man breaks my commands, I will personally

cut out his liver and eat it before life fades from his eves." He smiled, and even the hardest of these men felt a chill, for the man's teeth had been filed to points, the mark of a Skashakan cannibal. The leader threw back his hood, revealing a head devoid of hair. His massive brow was close to a deformity, as was his protruding jaw. Each earlobe had been pierced and stretched until long loops of flesh hung to his shoulders, with gold fetishes tied to the loops. A golden ring decorated his nose, and his fair skin was covered in purple tattoos, which made his blue eyes even more startling and terrifying.

The captain glanced back into the harbor, where the third wave of pinnaces should be approaching, another three hundred men. Silence was less a problem for the third wave, as he fully expected the alarm to sound before the third band of raiders reached the docks.

Another man approached and said, "Captain, everyone is in place."

To the group nearest him he said, "Go, the gates will be open when you reach them. Hold or die."

To the man who had approached he said, "Does evervone understand the orders?"

The man nodded. "Yes. They can kill the old men and old women, and any children too young to survive the journey, but everyone who is young and healthy is to be captured, not killed."

"And the girls?"

"The men don't like it, Captain. A little rape is part of the caper. Some say the best part," he added with a smirk.

The captain's hand shot out and gripped the man's shirt. Pulling him close enough so his sick-sweet breath filled the man's nostrils, he spoke in tones of low menace. "Vasarius, you have your orders." He pushed the man roughly away and pointed to where a half-dozen men stood silently observing. Cross-gartered sandals too light for these cooler climates were all the protection afforded their feet, and except for the black leather harnesses that formed an H on back and chest, and leather masks covering their faces, they wore no clothing save black leather kilts. They stood motionless in the cool night air, ignoring whatever discomfort the other men might have felt. They were slavers from the guild in Durbin, and their reputations were enough to cow even as hard a crew as Captain Render's band of cutthroats. Render said, "Well enough I know who put that com-

plaint in the men's minds. You're too hungry for the feel of young girls' flesh to make a good slaver, Quegan, so mark this: if one of these maidens is violated, I will kill the offending man and take your head for good measure. With your share of the gold you can buy yourself a dozen young girls once you reach Kesh. Now see to your men!" He shoved the Quegan pirate away and turned to the remaining reivers, who stood ready to attack.

He held his hand aloft, signaling the men on the docks to be guiet. They waited for the sound of battle to reach them. Long moments passed, then suddenly an alarm sounded from the keep. The pirate captain signaled and the assembled throng of cutthroats roared as one and sped into the town. Within minutes, flames were lighting the night, as torches were put to strategic buildings.

Captain Render howled a delighted laugh, knowing that the once peaceful town of Grydee was dissolving into chaos. He was in his element, and like the master of ceremonies at a grand palace gala, he delighted in every aspect of the event unfolding as planned. Pulling his own sword from its scabbard, he turned and raced after his charging men, intent on getting his fair share of the murder.

Briani's eyes opened. Something was wrong. A child of Armengar, a city of constant warfare, she had learned to sleep in armor with a sword in her hand before reaching womanhood. Past sixty, she still moved out of her bed with the fluid grace of a woman half her age. Without thought, she drew her sword from the scabbard that hung from the wall peg closest to her dressing table. Clad only in a thin nightshirt, her grey hair tumbling around her shoulders, she moved toward the door of her suite.

A scream echoed down the hall and Briana hurried toward the door. It opened as she reached for it, and she leaped hack, her sword coming up. Before her stood a stranger, his sword leveled in her direction. A rough voice shouted from down the corridor and the distant sounds of fighting came from somewhere else in the keep. The figure in the door showed no features, as another stood behind him holding a torch, rendering the first man in silhouette. Briana brought her sword up and waited.

The shadowy figure stepped forward: a short man with close-cropped blond hair, his blue eyes half-mad under heavy brows as he grinned at her. "Just a grand-mother with a sword," he complained, his voice almost a whine. "Too old to sell. If lid lith er," he lashed out with his sword. The Duchess parried easily, slipping her blade around his and running up inside his guard to catch him under the arm in a swift killing blow.

"She's killed little Harold!" cried the man holding the torch. Three men unshed forward past the torchbearer, fanning out. Brians stepped back, keeping her eyes on the centermost, while remaining aware of the other two. She knew the center opponent was likely to feign attack, while the true attack would come from one or both of the men on the flanks. Her only hope was that these men were not practiced in flighting in a coordinated fashion and would inconvenience one another.

As she anticipated, the center swordsman leaped forward and then back. The man on her left, her weakest side, was moving toward her, his massive cutlass held high for a slashing blow. Briana ducked under his blade, impaling him on her sword point. As the man's legs went rubbery, she gripped his free hand with her own. Swinging him to her right, she propelled him into the path of the attacker on the right.

The center attacker was the next to die, as he fully expected her to be occupied by his companions and did not anticipate her attack. Briana's sword lashed out, taking him in the throat, and he stumbled back, unable to make a sound as blood fountained from the gaping wound under his chin. The last man died as he tried to free himself from the body of his companion, a slashing blow to the back of his neck killing him instantly.

Briana reached down and freed a long dagger from the belt of the last man to die, as she knew she would have no time to don armor or find a shield. The raider who stood before the door holding the torch was watching down the hall, expecting the other three to have finished the lone woman in her chamber. He died before he had time to turn and see if the murder was done.

The dying man fell atop his torch, extinguishing it. Briana turned in shock as the hallway remained lighted. Angry red and yellow light illuminated the corridor, and she saw that the far end of the hall was ablaze. A scream caused Briana to turn from the flames and run as fast as she could toward her daughter's rooms.

Bare feet slapped on flagstones as the Duchess of Crydee raced to the far end of the hall. There Abigail crouched in a doorway, her nightgown half torn from her shoulders. Her eyes were wide with fear. At her feet lay a dead raider, and at her side Margaret crouched, a long dagger held ready. A wounded man eyed her wariby, and Margaret never acknowledged her mother's approach, so as not to give the man warning. He died a second later as Briana struck him from behind.

Margaret grabbed the fallen men's sword and felt its balance. Abigail rose, and Margaret thrust the dagger at her, hilt first.

Abigail looked down at the bloody weapon and reached to take it, then clutched at falling fabric as the nightdress slipped down off her shoulder.

"Damn it, Abigail, worry about your modesty later! If you live long enough!"

Abigail took the dagger, and the torn nightgown fell to her waist. She covered her breasts with her left arm and awkwardly gripped the bloody hilt. Then she grabbed the fabric of her gown and tried to cover herself.

Briana pointed down the hallway, saying, "For them to be here, they've already killed our soldiers on the lower floors. If we can hold at the tower until the rest of the garrison fights its way from the barracks to the keep, we may survive."

The three women headed toward the far door, to the southern tower of the keep. But before they were half-way to the door, a half-dozen men came into view. Briana halted and motioned for her daughter and Abigail to move back toward their quarters, as she stood ready to defend them.

Margaret took one step and halted as more men came into view behind them. She spun, back to back with her mother, and said, "We can't."

Briana glanced behind her, then said, "Try to hold as long as you can."

Margaret pushed Abigail to her left, saying, "They will try to come at me from my weak side." Abigail looked confused, so she said, "My left side! Don't worry about your right. Stab at anything that moves on your left."

The frightened girl awkwardly held the blade out, her knuckles white from holding it so tight. Her left arm pressed hard across her chest, holding up the top of her nightdress. The men at both ends of the hall approached warily. They stopped out of sword range and waited.

varily. They stopped out of sword range and waited.

Then those facing Margaret and Abigail moved aside,

to let three large men in black masks come to the fore. The leader of the three looked at the women a long moment and said, "Kill the old one, but do not harm the two young ones."

With unexpected speed, one of the three men lashed out underhand with a heavy black whip. The slaver's strap snaked toward Margaret's sword arm. She instinctively twisted her wrist in a downward parry, but this was not a blade she attempted to block. The cord turned over in a serpentine and snapped around her arm, the stinging impact bringing a gasp from her. Rough leather closed down on her forearm as the large slaver pulled hard on the whip. Margaret was a strong young woman, but she was pulled off bladance, veiling as she fell.

Briana spun around to see what was wrong with her daughter, and found Abigail staring, eyes wide with terror, as Margaret was dragged along the floor by the big slaver. Briana leaped forward, blade slashing down, trying to sever the whip.

Margaret rolled on her back, yelling to Abigail, "Cut tit" Then she saw Briana's eyes widen. Behind her stood a raider, and Margaret knew he had seized the moment to strike from behind. "Abby! Cut the cord!" screamed Margaret, but her companion could only huddle in fear, pressine her back to the wall.

"Mother!" screamed Margaret as Briana fell to her knees. Another man stepped up behind the first and grabbed the Duchess by her hair, pulling her head back for a killing blow. Briana reversed her sword and thust backward hard. The man holding her hair screamed in agony, doubling over as blood fountained through his fingers while he clutched at his groin.

The man who had struck Briana first didn't hesitate. He drew back his sword and plunged it hard once again into her back. Rough hands grabbed Margaret's arm and twisted it cruelly, forcing her to drop the sword. "Mother!" she screamed again as Briana's eyes went vacant and she fell forward onto the stone floor.

The third slaver rushed forward and grabbed Abigail by the hair, yanking her roughly up, forcing her to stand on tiptoe. She screamed in terror and the dagger fell from her hand as she reached upward to relieve the pain of being pulled up by her tresses, and her gown fell to her waist.

The men howled and laughed in delight at the sight of her bare breasts. One started to move toward her, stepping over the still body of the Duchess, and the first slaver shouted, "Touch her and die!"

Two men hauled Margaret, kicking and clawing, up off the floor and quickly tied the girl's wrists, then hobbled her feet so she couldn't kick out. The slaver who had used his whip on her slid a wooden rod through the cords around her wrists and ordered the two men to hold her up. Margaret, like Abigail, had to stand on tiptoe, which gawe her little opportunity to resist. The leader of the slavers reached out and ripped the bodice of Margaret's gown. She spat at him, but he ignored the splittle upon his black mask. Gripping the waistband, he tore away the remaining doth and she stood naked before him. With a practiced eye, he inspected her. He

touched her small breasts and ran his hand down her flat stomach. "Turn her," he commanded. The two men turned Margaret to face away from the slaver. The slaver ran his hand down her back; there was nothing intimate in the touch. He inspected her the way a horse trader inspected a potential purchase. He fondled her buttocks and ran his hand down long legs that were well muscled. With a satisfied grunt, the said, "This one isn't pretty, but she is steel under that velvet skin. There's a market for strong girls who can fight. Some buyers like them mean and rough, Or she may earn her life fighting in the arena."

He then looked back at Abigail. He motioned and another slaver tore away all her gown. The men laughed appreciatively at the sight of the rest of her body, and several complained openly about not being able to take her right there.

The slaver's eyes lingered over Abigail's full young form, and he said, "That one is unusually beautiful. She will fetch twenty-five thousand golden ecus, perhaps as high as fifty if she's a virgin." Some of the men laughed and others whistled at the amount; if was more wealth than they could imagine. Wrap them both so there are no marks on their skin. If I see so much as a scratch that wasn't here this moment, I'll know they were not cared for and I will kill the man who marks then.

The two other slavers produced soft shapeless robes that were fashioned so they could be tied over the shoulders and around the neck, so the captives could be covered without their arms and legs being freed. Abigail wept openly and Margaret continued to struggle as rough hands lingered while they covered the girls. One of the men still fondled Abigail even after the robe was properly tied.

"Enough!" shouted the slaver. "You'll be getting ideas before long, and then I shall have to kill you!"

The man on the floor moaned in pain, and the slaver glanced back at him as Abigail had her hands tied to a pole above her head. "Nothing can be done. Kill him."

One of his companions said, "Sorry, Tall John. We'll use your share of the gold to hoist a drink in your name," and cut the man's throat expertly. As life fled from the dying man's eyes, the one who killed him wiped his blade on the dead man's tunic and said in a friendly way, "See you in hell someday."

A man ran from the far end of the hallway, shouting, "The fire's spreading!"

"We leave!" commanded the slaver. He led the band and their two captives away. Tied to a pole, the ends carried upon the shoulder of a man in front of and one behind her, and with her feet hobbled, Margaret still refused to come along meekly. She gripped the pole and kicked with both feet at the man behind her, sending him to the floor. She lost her footing and found herself sitting upon the flagstone staring backward. The lead slaver shouted, "Carry her if you must." Quickly her feet were tied to the pole; and she was hanging like a trophy animal. As she was picked up, the could see back into the hall. Through eyes filed with tears of rage and sorrow she saw her mother lying face down on the cold stones, her blood pooling around her.



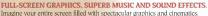


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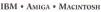
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Tomorrow's Books

November 1992 Releases





Compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett

Ray Bradbury: The Ray Bradbury Chronicles: Volume 3, Bantam Spectra/Graphic Novels, tr pb orig, 80 pp, \$10.00. Some Bradbury tales, adapted by some of today's top graphic illustrators

Gillian Bradshaw: Hauk of May, Bantam Spectra Fantasy, ph relss, 320 pp, 84.99. Volume one of an Arthurian tidigy. The warrior Gwalchmai, nephew to King Arthur and son of the evil sorceress Mongawse, is forced to choose between his mother's path of Dark power and Arthur's empire of Light.

Alan Brennert: Kindred Spirits, Tor Books, Contemporary Fantasy/ Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. After giving up and trying to end it all, the disembodied spirits of two New Yorkers meet in the halls of Bellevue hospital and get a second chance at happiness.

Lois McMaster Bujold: Barrayar, Baen SF, ph reiss, 400 pp, 84-99. Legendary commander Cordelia Naismith Vorlossigan wants only to live quietly with her husband, the commander of the Barrayaran forces she defeated. But Cordelia never guessed the part her unborn son would have in Barraryar's bloody legacy.

Lois McMaster Bujold: Borders of Infinity, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. Peripatetic young mercenary Miles Vorkosigan explores the divergent calls of duty, honor and love.

Lois McMaster Bujold: Brothers in Arms, Baen SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$4.99. The Dendarii Mercenaries thought shore leave on old Earth would nice. But with Admiral Miles Naismith of Dendarii and his clone, Lieutenant Lord Vorkosigan of Barrayar, in the same place, it's more like crazy.

Lois McMaster Bujold: The Spirit Ring, Baen Fantasy, hc, 384 pp, \$17.00. Fiametta was an unpaid apprentice to her father, a legendary creator of enchanted objets d'art. And when her father's patron is killed, all that can save Fiametta from eternal damnation is her own single magical creation.

Lois McMaster Bujold: The Warritor's Apprentice, Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.50. Miles Vorkosigan comes of age, and creates the Dendarii Mercenaries. Edgar Rice Burroughs: The Eternal

Savage. Del Rey SF, pb reiss, 208 pp, \$3.99. The classic story of a woman whose search for adventure leads her unexpectedly into the arms of Nu, a mighty hunter of the long-vanished Niocene Age.

Edgar Rice Burroughs: Beyond the Farthest Star, Del Rey SF, pb reiss, 128 pp, \$3.99. Another classic, about a pllot shot down over strife-torn Europe by the Nazis, who finds himself mysteriously transported to a far-off planet, and joins another fight for freedom.

Edgar Rice Burroughs: The Land

of Hidden Men, Del Rey SF, pb reiss, 208 pp, \$3.99. American explorer Gordon King stumbles upon Pnom Dhek, a legendary Cambodian city long hidden from the outside world.

Pat Cadigan: Fools, Bantam Spectra SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$5.99. In a world of mindsuckers and bodysnatchers, of Brain Police and personalities for sale, you can't take anything for granted ... not even your own identity ...

Leonard Carpenter: Conain the Savage, Tor Fantasy, tr pb orig, 288 pp, \$7.99. Conan of Cimmeria is the first man ever to escape the hellish prison mines of Brythunia. And when the forest folk who aided him fall victim to a demon-goddess, Conan vows vengeance. Jack L. Chalker: The Ninety Tril-

tion Fausts, Ace SF, first time in pb, 368 pp, \$4.99. For centuries the legendary Quintara demons captured the imaginations of three alien races; now these all-too-real creatures are after their souls. Book 3 of the Quintara Marathon. C.J. Cherryh; Yegenie, Del Rey

Fantasy, pb rep, 320 pp, 55.99. Ilyana, daughter of the wizard Eveshka, has grown up in the dangerous, spirit-haunted wilderness near Kiev. But still, every spring, she has snuck out to meet het secret playmate, a ghostly boy her own age... and now she has begun to fall in love. Sequel to Chernevog.

Elaine Cunningham: The Radiant

Dragon, TSR, Inc. Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Space adventurer Teldin Moore is caught in the middle as the

Key to Abbreviations

hc: hardcover, almost always an original publication.

pb orig: paperback original, not published previously in any other format. pb reiss: paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep: paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

tr pb: trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.









forces of the universe move toward fullscale conflict. The fourth SPELIJAMMER™ novel in the Cloakmaster Cycle.

Sean Dalton: Time Trap: Pleces of Efglpt, Ace SF, pb orig, 192 pp, 84-50. Zöh-century man Noel Kedran was caught in a time trap. Now, transported to the pirate-plagued Caribbean Sea of 1697, Noel must prevent a human sacrifice that could change history, and stop his twisted twin before he destroys them both. Book 3 in the Time Trap series.

Jack Dann & Gardner Dozols, editors: Unicorns II, Acc Fantasx, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Twelve stories of the unicorn and its world, by Michael Bishop, Susan Casper & Gardner Dozois, Jack Dann, Gregory Frost, Jack C. Haldeman II, Janet Kagan, Tanith Lee, Mike Resnick, Lawrence Watt-Evans, Patricia C. wrede, William F. Wu, and Jane Yolen.

Ellen Datlow, editor: A Whisper of Blood, Berkley Horror, pb rep. 288 pp. \$4.99. A collection of new vampire tales from Jonathan Carroll, Suzy McKee Charnas, David J. Schow, Robert Silverberg, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and thirteen other authors. Followup to Blood B Not Enough.

L. Sprague de Camp: The Venom

Trees of Sunga, Del Rey SF, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99. Kirk Salazar came to Sunga to do field research required for his degree. But, as his work progressed, he soon discovered that to defend his thesis he'd also have to defend his life.

John DeChancle: Castle Spellbound, Ace SF, pb orig, 240 pp, 84.99. Lord Incarnadine's Castle Perilous, with its 144,000 doors, attracts many uninvited guests. And a malfunction in the magical defense system is about to send these party-crashers spinning.

party-crashers spinning.

Gordon R. Dickson: The Dragon
at War, Ace Fantasy, hc orig, \$18.95.
In this fourth book of the Dragon Knight

series, Baron Jim takes on England's most familiar enemy, the French—who are allied with the English isle's most feared horror: the mighty serpents of the deep undersea.

William C. Dietz. Drifter's Wara, Ace SF, plo rig. 240 pp, \$4.99, in space smuggler Pik Lando's third adventure, he and his crew take over an alien drift ship loaded with advanced machinery. But, as alien warfare and government boumly hunters close in, Lando must activate the ship—sending it uncontrollably to its preprogrammed destination.

William C. Dietz: Mars Prime, Roc SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. On a one-way trip to colonize Mars, a killer on board marks Earth's top reporter as his next victim. Sequel to Matrix Man.

Stephen R. Donaldson: A Dark and Hungry God Arises: The Gap Into Power, Bantam Spectra SF, hc, 448 pp, \$21.50. Billingate is an illegal shipyard, gateway to the alten realm of the Annion, humanity's enemy. Here the uncertain face of Morn Hyland will be decided, and with it the future of humankind. Book 3 of a series.

David Drake: The Jungle, Tor SF, first time in pb, 288 pp, 54-99. The last survivors of Earth struggle to survive in domed Keeps in the oceans of Venus. But, as resources become scarce, human mercenaries set out to explore and conquer the vast and deadly jungle that covers the planet's only land surface. Set in the universe created by Henry Kuttner in Class By Nighl.

John M. Ford: Web of Angels, Tor SF, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$3.99. Grailer is a Webspinner, one of the extraordinary people with the ability to manipulate the Web, the galactic network. As a child, his unauthorized talent made him a condemned outlaw, and only now is he ready to do battle with the Web itself.

Alan Dean Foster: Star Trek Log Five, Del Rey SF, pb reiss w/new cover, 208 pp, \$4.99. More adventures of James T. Kirk and the U.S.S. Enterprise, based on the animated series.

L.A. Graf. Death Count, Pocket Books, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. Star Trek book #62. Tensions flare between Andorians and Orions. And the U.S.S. Enterprise confronts murder and sabotage while struggling to prevent interplanetary war. Rosalind M, Greenberg and Martin

H. Greenberg, editors: Christmas
Bestlary, DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 320
pp, \$4.99. A collection of original holiday tales about legendary creatures of
enchantment. Stories by Alan Dean Foster, Tanya Hoff, Jennifer Roberson, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, Harry Turledove,
Jane Yolen, and others.
Brothers Grimm: The Complete

Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm, Bantam Books, tp rep, 768 pp, \$15.00. An unabridged collection of the classic fairy tales, translated by Jack Zipes. David G. Hartwell, editor: Christ-

mas Stars, Tor SF, pb orig, 320 pp. §4.99. A collection of futuristic Yuletde stories. Brhan Addiss, Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clark, Tom Disch, William Gibson, Anne McGaffrey, Frederik Pohl, Connie Willis, and Gene Wolfe take Christmas into the next century—and beyond. Zack Hutches: Deeb Freeze, DAW

SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. When a retired couple disappears while on a round-the-galaxy tour off the beaten track, their worried children follow them—into an ancient, allen-set trap which no being has ever escaped.

Zack Hughes: Mother Lode, DAW SF, pb reiss, \$4.99. Erin's only inheritance was the mining tug Mother Lode, and coordinates which could lead her to









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William H. Keith, Jr.: The Saga of the Gray Death Legion: Mercenary's Star, Roc SF/FASA, ph orig, 416 pp, \$4.99. Mercenary warriors born out of treachery and deceit fight to free a quiet planet from vicious oppressors. A Batuletech novel.

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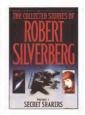
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A Troll of Surewould Forest

(Continued from page 14)

child were to have overheard you speaking that dreadful word?"

"But it's a word that every kid knows anyhow. I mean, it's something people do, isn't it? And there's no other word that means the same thing."

"You should say 'synonym."

"What?"

"'Synonym,'" said the witch in a tired, lecturing tone of voice, "is a word that means the same thing."

"Well then, in future I'll say 'synonym' instead of . . ."

The way the witch was looking at him, Joe didn't have
the nerve to repeat the word that had brought down the
lightning and summoned Alecto.

Seeing this, she smiled. "Open your hand!" she commanded abruptly.

Recalling the words of the second verse of the Themesong of Surewould Forest, which are "Open your hand / At the witch's command," Joe did as he was told. Immediately Alecto gave the palm of his hand a hard whack with her ruler.

"Ouch!" Joe shouted. "Why'd you do that?"

"In order," she replied, "to fell your fortune." She fit her ruler into a white plastic sheath that hung from her wide white plastic belt and put the bar of Fels-Naphtha scap in a little pouch designed for that purpose that hung from the other side of her belt. Then she took his smarting hand and with a long, curling fingermail scratched at the welt the ruler had missed. "Ab-hal" she said, as red letters formed under and disappeared under the pressure of her moving fingermail. "Obl-hol Very interesting."

Then she let go of his hand and at once took the golden ruler out of its sheath. Joe pulled his hand back before she could strike his palm again with the ruler.

"Aren't you going to tell me what you read in my palm?" he asked.

"Certainly-for a hundred thousand dollars."

"A hundred thousand dollars!"

"That's the standard matinee rate. You won't find any other witch in Surewould Forest who'll read your palm for less."

Joe began to get a sinking feeling that his visit to Surewould Forest was going to cost him a lot more than the two hundred fifty thousand dollars he'd been debited at the ticket booth. He handed Alecto his credit card, and she took it over to the tree trunk the lightning had split in two. Apparently the lightning hadn't harmed the credit console in the hole in the trunk, for Alecto reached up and put Joe's card into the same hole. As she did so, her bulky white skirts lifted up a few inches from the ground, and Joe thought he could see four feet peeking out under the hem—two large feet in practical white pumps and two little feet in little black boots.

A scratchy recording announced, "Our circuits are all busy at this time, Please be patient until a line becomes free." This was followed by an all-string orchestra version of the Themesong of Surewould Forest. "Oh, fudge and fiddlesticks," Alecto exclaimed, kicking the base of the tree, whereupon the music broke off. Joe couldn't keep from staring at the hem of her skirt,

trying to catch another glimpse of her supernumerary feet. "Supernumerary" means when there are more of something than there are supposed to be, the way there are more letters in the word "supernumerary" than it seems to need. It's a word you should remember.

"Well," said Alecto, "I can't take all day with one matinec customer. Let's assume your credit is okay and move right along. Here's your fortune. Listen carefully, because I won't repeat it.

> "When the captive hour's free, When the ruler cedes the reign, When from forth the riven tree Issue lobsters and lo mein, Then shall Joe Palooka be The Prince of Aquitaine."

"That's it?" said Joe.

"I should say that was rather a lot," said the witch huffily.

"But it doesn't make any sense."

"If you *understand* it, it makes perfect sense. But if you'd prefer a plain, no-frills type of fortune, try this:

"By midnight tonight, O doughty knight, You'll give Miss Right Your troth in plight."

"I'll give who my what?"

"You'll get married, dimwit."

"Me? Married? Tonight?"

"You. Married. Tonight."

"Impossible!"

"I don't see why. There's always a Justice of the Peace somewhere about the forest. So if you choose to get married, there's nothing to stop you. Tell me this—if you could, would you want to get married?"

"Sure I would," said Joe. "I just have never met the right girl."

"How's that?" said the witch, cupping her hand to her ear.

"I said, sure I would. Anybody would who isn't married already, that's just human nature."

"What? Speak up!"

"I SAID I SURE WOULD!" Joe shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Then meet your bride-to-be!" shrieked Alecto. With a cackle of malicious glee she lifted her wide white skirts to reveal a tiny and hideously deformed lady dwarf.

Chapter Five

Ruled by a Golden Ruler

The lady dwarf came out from under the witch's skirts and mopped her bulging forehead with a bandana. She was dressed like a Swiss peasant girl, in a dirndl dress embroidered in the brightest colors, and had big hoops of gold in her ears.

"Thank heaventh that'th over," she said in a tiny, piping voice. "I thought I'd die of thuffocation."

"Coughdrop," said the witch, "I'd like you to meet Mr. Palooka. He has come to Surewould Forest to marry you. Mr. Palooka, I'd like you to meet my daughter Coughdrop."

"Pleathed to meet you, Mr. Palooka," said Coughdrop. who was afflicted with a speech impairment that made her pronounce all her s's as th's.

As she held out her tiny, beringed hand to be shaken, Joe noticed that it bore not four rings but five. The fifth ring, which was no bigger around than the nozzle on a tube of toothpaste, was affixed to a supernumerary finger that stuck out from the side of her hand. Joe looked down at her other hand, which held an unlighted cigarette. That hand also had one finger too many.

Reluctantly and very quickly. Joe shook Coughdrop's hand. It felt like a cold, wet sponge.

"I should explain right away," said Joe, trying to look anywhere but at Coughdrop's face, "that what your mother said is not really so. My name is not Palooka, and I didn't come to Surewould Forest to marry you. I mean. how could I have? Until just this minute I didn't know that you existed.'

"Got a light?" Coughdrop said, holding the unlighted cigarette to her puckered lips. Nothing he'd said seemed to have registered

Joe took his n*cl**r-powered cigarette lighter from where he kept it in the storage area of his hat and snapped a flame from the microblast cone. He held the flame to Coughdrop's cigarette, and she sucked in a lungful of smoke.

"I choose to thmoke Thmoketh," she said, exhaling smoke in two streams of coiling whiteness from her nostrils. "Either Thmoketh Regular or Thmoketh Menthol. It would be hard to thay why-but let me try:

> "When I'm broke I take a toke Of tathty Thmoke, And everything ith okie-doke. That'th why I thing thith thong and thay That Thmoke'th the thmoke for me. Hurray!"

Somehow hearing a real person, even a lady dwarf in a dirndl dress, singing the familiar jingle made both the jingle and the act of smoking seem unnatural and even slightly disgusting. Joe felt a strong urge to get away from Alecto and Coughdrop, However, he was aware that even witches and dwarves have feelings, and he didn't want to burt theirs.

"So anyhow," said Joe, with a sideways look to the path that led to the trolls' part of the forest, "it was, um, nice to make your acquaintance, and, um, I've got to be on my way."

"You aren't going anywhere," said Alecto matter-offactly, "Not until you're married,"

"But-

"There are no buts about it. When I asked you if you wanted to get married, you answered, two times, 'Sure I would,' and then the third time your reply was 'I sure would.' Here in Surewould Forest there is no more solemn or binding oath. By midnight tonight you must be married. That is the rule, and this is the ruler." She brandished the golden ruler under Joe's nose. "Everyone here must follow the ruler's rules, and there are no excentions."

"But I have no desire to marry your daughter."

"Do you mean to imply, Mr. Palooka, that there is something wrong with my daughter?" Alecto raised her ruler menacingly.

Joe took a step backward. "No, that's not it. Only-" "Coughdrop!" the witch screamed. "Stop picking your

"Yeth, Mother." Coughdrop took her supernumerary finger from her nostril and looked about for somewhere

to wipe the snot. "Show Mr. Palooka your eyes, my dear," Alecto commanded her daughter. She bent close to Joe's ear and whispered. "Coughdrop may be rather plain in some respects, but I think you'll have to agree that she has beautiful eyes."

"No, really, that isn't necessary," said Ioe, backing away nervously from the lady dwarf, who, obedient to Alecto, approached Joe until the crown of her braids almost brushed the smooth red polyester of his jogging shorts. She tilted back her head and stared up at his face with goggling, watery eyes.

"If we have a little girl," Coughdrop declared, "I want to call her Michelle. Or Maybelline. Or maybe Margaret. But not Thamantha, Thamantha hath an eth. I bate etheth."

"And what if the little nipper should be a boy?" Alecto asked.

"If it'th a boy, I don't care. Thtan, Thid, Thteve, Tham -it'th all the thame to me. We don't want a boy. We want a girl."

"Hey, listen, will you-we don't want anything. I mean, not together. Because we are not getting married. That was your mother's idea, not mine.'

"It may have been my idea," said Alecto, "but it's your fortune. I've never read a palm so clear on one single point. You'll marry by midnight tonight, there's no doubt about it."

"Does it say I'll marry ber?" Joe insisted, pointing a finger down at the bull's-eve of Coughdrop's crown of

Alecto frowned. "In fact it does not specify who your bride will be, not precisely."

"So then it could be someone else?" "Yes, yes-if you want to be legalistic, there's nothing to prevent you from marrying someone else-if you can

find another young lady who will accept your proposal and marry you by midnight. But if you can't do that, then you must marry Coughdrop."

"Well, if those are the rules," said Joe, in a sarcastic tone of voice, though he was not usually a sarcastic person, "then I'd better start looking right now. See you around." He turned on his heel and began walking toward the signpost.

"You can *look* all you like," said Alecto, lifting the golden ruler high over her head, "but you aren't *going* anywhere!" She pointed the ruler at Joe's retreating figure, and suddenly there was an iron cage around him.

The bars of the cage were an inch thick and six inchespart. It was four feet square inside and six feet tall, which was just high enough for Joe to be able to wear his stovepipe hat. Joe, in case I haven't already mentioned it, was of below-average height. Being short is notifying to be ashamed of. In fact, sometimes being short is a real advantage, such as times like this when you're wearing a stovepipe hat and you're locked in a cage that is only six feet high.

Alcot sheathed her ruler and brushed her hands together to express her satisfaction with a job well done. "I think it's time," she said, "that I was on my way. There are dozens of other malefactors waiting for me to punish them. And don't think I've forgomen about your filthy tongue either, Mr. Palooka. It will have a proper scrubbing when I get back. Which will be a few minutes before midnight." Alecto cackled evilly and littled her wide white skirts. "Come along, Coughdrop. We've work to do."

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no," said Coughdrop. "I don't like it in there. It'th dark and it'th thuffy and I can't thmoke or anything. I want to thtay here with Mr. Palooka. I want to be hith jailer."

"Ah, Mr. Palooka," said Alecto, "I think you have made a conquest." She bent down, which wasn't easy for someone so overweight, and chucked Coughdrop under her chin. "Is my little chickadee wanting to fly from her Mommy's nest? Has she found her own husband in his own little cage?"
"Gimme the key, Mommy, gimme the key, gimme the

key!"

"Very well," said Alecto, pulling up from inside the

bodice of her dress a long chain with a large iron key at the end of it. When she hung the chain about her daughter's neck, the key brushed the tips of her tiny black hobnailed boots. "But you must promise not to let Mr. Palooka out of his cage—even if he begs you on his bended knees."

"I promithe," said Coughdrop.

Alecto raised her ruler and recited a magic spell so fast that not a single word of it was comprehensible. For a moment a blue light flickered around her, and then she disappeared into a puff of smoke.

Chapter Six

All That Is Solid Melts Into Air

"I'm glad she'th gone," said Coughdrop, when they were alone. "Now I can thit down thomewhere and read a thtory. Do you like thtorieth?"

"My life is story enough for me," said Joe, who was feeling sorry for himself and annoyed with Coughdrop.

"Oh, my life ith tho mitherable that the only time I'm ever happy ith when I've got my nothe in a book. I am an incurable ethcapitht. I'll read anything—mythterieth, romantheth, thome of the old clathicth, ethpecially Thir Walter Thorthi'th, but what I like moth to fall ith thord and thorthery thortieth. Do you like thord and thorthery?"

"I don't know," said Joe. "I can't read."

"You can't read!" exclaimed Coughdrop. "I thought ev-'eryone could read. Mithe read. Thquirrelth read. Even—" "Even robins can read," Joe continued in chorus with Coughdrop. "I know all that, and actually I can read, a

little. I've just never read an entire book."

He didn't think he was obliged to explain that he knew only twelve of the alphabet's twenty-five letters or

that all he'd read so far were the four signs on the signpost and the three words carved in the heart. And a lot of good those reading skills had done him! Here he was, still stuck beside the signpost, the prisoner of a lady dwarf who expected him to marry her. Coughdrop finished her cigarette and ground out the

butt on the dirt path with the toe of her little hobbailed boot. She patted the various pockets of her dirndl dress, all the while becoming more and more alarmed. "Oh-oh," she said. "Oh, darn. Oh, double darn!" "What's wrong?" asked Joe.

"I'm out of Thmoketh!"

"I'm out of Thmoketh!"

"Well, you'll have to buy another pack," Joe said. "If you can buy potato chips here, I'm sure there's somewhere that sells cigarettes."
"But I can't buy anything," Coughdrop moaned. "Moth-

er wouldn't give me my allowanthe thith week. I wath naughty."

"You said a word vou shouldn't have?"

Tou said a word you shouldn't have:

"Worthe." She looked down guiltily at the tips of her boots. "I made wee-wee in my bed. Thometimeth, when I have nightmareth, I can't help it." Joe said nothing.

joe said nouiii.

"I get very nervouth when I can't thmoke a thigaretté." He still said nothing.

"You have thome Thmoketh, don't you?" Coughdrop asked slyly. "In your thurvival pack."
"So I do."

"Let me have one? Pleathe let me have one?"

Joe said nothing.

"Not the whole pack, I don't athk that. Jutht a thingle thigarette!"

He still said nothing.

suggested.

"I think you're being very thelfish. One thigarette ith not too much to athk."

"Maybe you could give me something in return," Joe

"Would you like my copy of Thidonia the Thorthereth?" "It wasn't a book I had in mind. It was the kev."

"Mother would have a fit if I let you ethcape." Joe said nothing, and Coughdrop went to sit beneath the shade of the riven oak and opened her copy of Sidonia the Sorceress. She read quickly, so that the pupils of her eyes seemed to vibrate like the tines of a struck tuning fork, but after only a few pages she began to squirm and seemed unable to concentrate. She chewed on the nail of her supernumerary finger. Her eyes would stray from the pages of the book and fix on the plastic

carrier in Ioe's hand. At last she put the book aside and "Oh, very well, bere!" She lifted the heavy chain from her neck and offered it to Joe. "But I want the whole pack of Thmoketh."

"It's a deal," said Ioe.

returned to the cage.

He passed out the pack of Smokes through the bars and took the key on its long chain. He fitted the key into the keyhole in the door of the cage and twisted it first to the right and then to the left. Nothing happened. He used more force. Still nothing happened.

"I think," said Coughdrop, tearing off the cellophane wrapping of the Smokes package, "that we have been thnookered."

"You mean this isn't the right key?"

"It would theem not. Mother keepth keyth to a lot of cageth. Thith ith obviouthly the key to thomeone elthe'th cage. Thorry," She tapped a cigarette from the package. put it in her mouth, and, with trembling fingers, lighted a match and sucked flame into the cigarette.

"Garsh damn it." said Ioe. "Give me back my Smokes." "Fair'th fair," said Coughdrop indignantly. "Even if I knew it wath the wrong key, which I thwear I did not, you should thtick to your word. Now if you will ecthcuthe me. I will take my book elthewhere and enjoy thome peathe and quiet.'

Now you can imagine that this was a situation that left Ioe feeling cheated and extremely teed off. Coughdrop might not be to blame for the key being the wrong key, it might just be an accident, but knowing that didn't make Joe feel any better about being locked in a cage.

At this point I have to explain something about Joe's boss, Pizza Bill. A long time ago he too had been locked in a cage—a cage in the Federal Correctional Facility in Painesville, Ohio, There, while he was being corrected, he also acquired the valuable skill of picking locks. He became so skillful that one day he picked the lock on his own cage and then another harder-to-pick lock to the main gate and was able to get out of the Painesville Facility well ahead of schedule, Pizza Bill had never told Joe about his mostly unhappy experiences in Painesville, but he had explained many things about lock-picking to his young employee, just to pass the time when nobody was ordering pizzas. Joe had what Pizza Bill called E.S.F., extra-sensitive fingers, and with only a little practice he was as good as Pizza Bill at picking most kinds of locks.

However clever Joe's fingers might be, he still needed a small thin piece of metal to work with. The key Coughdrop had given him was much too bulky to be useful, and the key to his own room in the Dyer Street Residence Hotel was too small. What he needed was something more like . . .

His entertainment pin!

One of the worst things about being illiterate is that you often don't understand how basic things work in the world around you, such as where to get food stamps or where to go in case of fire, since this information is usually printed in books or posted on signs. Because he couldn't read, Joe had paid no attention to the sign at the ticket booth that had said. Under no circumstances should visitors to Surewould Forest remove or tamber with their Entertainment Pins. Neither had he ever read any explanation of the remarkable technological breakthroughs that lay behind the creation of Surewould Forest. He wasn't even aware of the single most basic fact about Surewould Forest, which was that it wasn't real. not at least in the sense that the Dyer Street Residence Hotel or the Federal Correctional Facility at Painesville. Ohio, were real.

But why hadn't Joe learned such basic information from some other source? you may ask. Couldn't he have found out about how Surewould Forest worked on television, for example? No doubt he could have, if he'd ever watched the Nightly News or the other kinds of tv programs that explained about reality and how it worked. but as I mentioned earlier Joe didn't like to watch the Nightly News, Like many other illiterates, he was lazy about more things than just reading. He didn't like any kind of thinking that involved a strain, and he especially didn't like to think about what people call reality, since when he did it was usually to discover some new way that the dice had been loaded against him. He might have been wrong about that, he probably was, some aspects of reality might have been neutral if not actually stacked in his favor. But that was how he felt, and as a result he knew next to nothing about the world he lived in except the basic minimum required to deliver pizzas and to get along with the less demanding kinds of people. It would take more time than we have to explain how Joe had got into this fix, and I only mention it at all by way of explaining that for a young man of twentyone years Joe was unusually innocent. As a matter of fact, unusually innocent people often become the heroes of stories, because they get into jams that betterinformed people have the good sense to avoid.

Such as now. Joe removed the entertainment pin from his hatband, and just as he should have known but didn't, the entire world around him started to disappear. Not all of it all at once, but bit by bit, here and there. slowly but surely. The first things to go were the little speckles of blue sky visible through the leaves. The blue speckles darkened very gradually to pure black, but not the way the sky turns dark at night, since there were no stars, there was just nothing. The leaves disappeared next, and the trunks of the farthest-away trees. But Joe, whose attention was fixed on the lock he was picking. noticed none of this. He didn't see the tree that the lightning had split slowly sink into the earth leaving not

so much as a twig behind. He didn't see Coughdrop vanish into two thin streams of smoke spiraling out from her nostrils. He didn't see the grass about him fade to nothingness and the path contract to a pinpoint and that pinpoint itself dissolve. Only when the lock he was trying to open absconded with all the rest of the phenomenal world did Joe realize that something strange and unaccountable was going on. By then it was too late. He was down on his knees in the void with nothing but his little blue book, his entertainment pin, and his survival pack as proof that anything else in Surewould Porest had ever existed.

Chapter Seven

The Voice from the Void

Joe may have been one of the most innocent young men in Innacity, but he wasn't dumb, as I think I've already explained, though maybe I haven't; it's getting hard to remember details like that. When the entire world around him disappeared, Joe realized it might have had something to do with his taking the entertainment pin out of his hat, so he stuck it back in. But nothing happened, because he'd broken the pin in trying to pick the lock.

How, you may ask, could Joe break a real entertarinment pin in a lock that wash real? The answer is that the lock was one of the few things in Surewould Forest that was real. Likewise the cage. Joe couldn't see the cage any longer, because his senses had been short-circuited in such a way that his only inputs had to come through the headphones in his head, and the only inputs to the headphones had been coming through the entertainment pin. Mentally speaking, you could say that the pin was doing all Joe's driving, or it had been till he'd broken the link.

Ioe was not alone in this zombielike situation. Every other visitor to Surewould Forest was also inside a little cage, thousands of them all lined up in rows and tiers just as they would have been in the Federal Correctional Facility in Painesville, Ohio. But the other people, because their pins were still in working order, all thought they were having adventures and interacting in Surewould Forest, while Joe believed himself to be trapped inside a four-foot-square area of featureless void. He could see the bent pin, the book the owl had dropped to him, and his survival pack. He could see his hands and feet and as much of his body as it was possible to see without a mirror. But that was it. He couldn't see the technicians and scriptwriters busy at work outside the rows and tiers of cages, or the people inside the cages, or the cages themselves for that matter, or even his own face, which was beginning to look scared in a way that you usually only see on the faces of small children, who don't have a clue to what is going on around them but feel terrified nevertheless.

Though Joe was not aware of the technicians and scriptwriters working for United Avatars, they were very much aware of him, since their work couldn't go forward smoothly until Joe's mind had been integrated back intothe network of minds it had been programmed to interact with at the level of the Collective Unconscious. You
will have to excuse a certain amount of technical language from time to time in this story. I know it's annoying, and some of it may make no sense at all to some of
you, but believe me, there's no casier way to describe
what was really happening to Joe and not just what he
thought was happening.

Still, it is probably a good idea to get back inside Joe's head and look at these things from his angle, which was the angle of someone completely bewildered with no idea of what to do.

dea of what to do.

"Joe," said a voice in his head. "Joe, can you hear me?"

"Who's that?" said Joe, with a feeling at once of alarm

"Joe, this is Rothbart Silverbowl, your scriptwriter.
Can you hear me clearly?"

"I can hear you, but who are you? Where are you? I can't see anything where I am. It's all gone black."

"Thank God," said the voice, in another tone entirely, as though it was talking to someone else. "His headphones still work. If they'd blown, we'd really be up 8h*t Creek."

"Who is this?" Joe insisted.

"I'll explain everything, Joe. Just give us a little time to get your coordinates. Are you feeling okay?"

o get your coordinates. Are you feeling okay?"
"What happened? Who's talking to me? Where are you?"

What nappened who staking to mer where a key our "My name, as I've said, is Rothbart silverbowl, but you can just call me Bart. And I'll call you Joe. Right now I'm in the control room trying to get a fix on where you are. Surewould Forest is a pretty big institution, Joe, and you've done something with your pin that's making it a little difficult to track you down. If you could give us your credit card number, we could run a check through the box office."

Joe felt in the back pocket of his shorts and then remembered that he'd given his credit card to Alecto to pay for his fortune being told and that she'd never given it back.

"I gave it, um, to a person I met before everything went blooey. A, um, woman. She said they had to do a credit check, and then I guess she forgot all about it." "Right. I remember that now. Well. loe, we'll just

have to do this by the numbers. Can you tell me this—when you got your ticket, was it for the matinee or the evening session?"

"It was going to go up to a higher price in fifteen minutes. The lady in the booth said I had good timing."

"Terrific, that nails it down. I'll have that punched in and we can send up a script gid in Just a see with a new jin. But you've got to promise, Joe, that you won't pull a sturt like this again. It creates problems not just for you but for everyone in the cast. Not to mention yours truly. So, when you get back to Surewould Forest and find yourself in another pickle, which is bound to happen, remember what that old wise owl told you. It's in the book. Everything you need to know to have a successful quest is right there in your little blue book. Don't take my word—check it out, see what it says on page one."

Joe opened the book.

There were six words that had twelve letters that Joe knew and twelve that he didn't all mixed together so that none of it made a bit of sense. If the letters he didn't know were blanks, then this is what the message on page one looked like to Joe:

"Well?" said Bart.

"Well, what?" said Joe sullenly. "It all looks like mozzarella cheese to me."

"Then you should ask someone who can read it what it means and learn the new letters so that the next time you can cope. You don't want to spend the rest of your life being unable to cope, do you?"

"I've done all right so far," said Joe.

"Have you?" said Bart.

What can you say when someone tells you the truth and it's as though he'd hit you on the head with a hammer? And Bart hadn't even said anything, just asked a question. Nothing is what you can say, and Joe said nothing.

"Think about it," said Bart, switching off the mike and putting Joe on hold.

At once, automatically, the Ambrosian Chorus began to sing the Ding-dong Singalong Song from the popular *Ding-dong Singalong* television show.

Ding-dong Singalong Song

Doo-dah, Ding-dong, Learn the lesson of our song: If white is right, then black is wrong, Doo-dah, Ding-dong.

See-saw, Sing-song, Cream of Wheat will make us strong For work that's fun as day is long. See-saw, Sing-song.

Poo-bah, Ping-pong, Welcome home the happy throng And join them in their singalong:

Doo-dah, Ding-dong, etc. . . .

It was a cheery song, and soon despite his dismal situation stranded in the void Joe had followed the suggestion implanted in the third verse and was singing along with the Ambrosian Chorus and sharing their digitally recorded glory.

Then, out of nowhere, a hand appeared before Joe. Just the hand, palm up, with only an inch or two of wrist behind it, at about the level of his own chest. Without having to be told, Joe realized that this must be the hand of the script girl Barr had promised to send and that she wanted the old entertainment pin back before she gave him the new one.

Joe put the bent-out-of-shape entertainment pin in

the disembodied hand, which disappeared for a moment and then reappeared with a new pin. Joe accepted the pin, and the hand redisappeared.

He had started to stick the pin into his hat when the thought occurred to him: Do I really want to go back to Surewould Forest? He wasn't so sure. He could get off on the idea of getting out into Nature and having adventures and getting a tan and all of that, but did that mean he had to get back inside that cage? And if he did, and if he couldn't find anyone but Coughdrop who would marry him and they did get married, did that mean when he left Surewould Forest and went back to the Dyer Street Residence Hotel and his job with Pizza Bill that he would still be married to a lady dwarf who lisped and spent all her time reading dumb books? That wasn't a question he wanted to leave up in the air. If the answer was yes, then he'd better just ask for his money back and say so long to Surewould Forest.

"Bart?" he called out over the booming of the Ambrosian Chorus. "Bart, are you still there?"

There was no reply, as Joe should have known, since Bart had put the phone on hold and was using the un-scheduled break to have a 5moke and read some more of the text that had been assigned for the American Studies course being broadcast on Wednesdays by Columbia University. It was called Jungle Babies, and it was a history of juvenile terrorism for the past one thousand years. This was not Bart's major area of concern, but crime is of interest to almost everyone, especially viewed from the safe distance of a book or the ty.

"Bart" Joe called again, louder, but when even this got no answer he remembered Bart's advice and looked in his little blue book. On the second page were four words and a phone number, and though Joe didn't know two of the letters in the second word and two more letters in the third word, it wasn't hard to figure out that one of these unknown letters, which appeared in both of the words, was B and made a blubbery sound, since if that hunch was right then the four words, when you sounded them out, told him just what he wanted to know. Namely DAL ROTHBART SILVERBOW, AT 911-1910.

Joe took his n*cl**r-powered transistor telephone out of the storage compartment of his stovepipe hat and dialed 911-1910, and sure enough it was Bart who answered.

"Hello," said the familiar voice from the void.

"Bart, is that you?"

"Joe? How'd you get my number?"

"It was in the book."

"Hey, man, you're learning to read! Good for you."

Joe was so pleased with his accomplishment and with
Bart's praise that he almost forgot why he'd phoned.

"Is something wrong?" Bart asked. "Why don't I have a fix on you? Doesn't the new pin work?"

"I suppose so. But I haven't put it in yet. I was wondering if I have to go back to the, uh, same situation."

"Of course you do. No reader can change what's already been written. The Moving Finger writes, and having writ, moves on."

"And do I really have to get married to that Coughdrop? Or is that all, you know, pretending?"

"A good script works both ways usually, Joe. It is pretending, but it's also quite real. What I mean is, when you're outside Surewould Forest you're a real person with a job and a lifestyle and all that-and so are the other people you'll meet here. And the decisions you make as you interact with them usually turn out to be valid decisions.

"But, Bart," Joe pleaded, "a dwarf? I mean, I know I'm short and all, but that seems pretty drastic."

"Bear in mind," said Bart, "that the people you meet here aren't exactly the same as you would perceive them if they were out in the real world. Just as you're not the same when they're perceiving you. Outside of Surewould Forest you're just Joe Doe; here you're Joe Palooka *

"And this Coughdrop person-what's she like outside of Surewould Forest?"

"That's confidential information, Joe. But I'll say this much: if you decide to marry her, that decision will be in complete harmony with your own essential character. Which is not to say that it will be a happy marriage, necessarily. But it will be the same sort of unhappy marriage you'd have made on the outside through a regular computer matrimonial service."

"But I didn't come here intending to get married. I was just looking for a good time."

"That's often the way of it, Ioe. Now, we shouldn't spend any more time discussing these technical matters. The longer you're off your pin, the harder it's going to be for me to suspend your disbelief once you're back on track. So, unless you've got some really essential question . . .?

"One more," said Joe.

"Shoot."

"What did it say on the first page of the book?" "I thought you'd never ask," said Bart. "It said, 'JOE,

DON'T PLAY WITCH'S OUIZ GAME.' " Ioe groaned.

"You see?" said Bart. "If you'd started reading that book when you should have, you wouldn't have got in such a fix in the first place. Now, no more chit-chat. There are other people waiting. Put your pin in your hat and let's get this show back on the road."

Chapter Eight

Enter a Goddess

With the pin in his hat Joe was instantly back inside the iron cage. It seemed as solid as ever, but out beyond the bars what could be seen of Surewould Forest didn't seem as real as it had just a few minutes ago. The leaves on the trees looked like the leaves Joe had cut out of colored paper back in day care, and the grass looked like those green carpets they roll out on sidewalks that pretend to be grass and get all squishy in the rain.

Coughdrop, too, who had fallen asleep over her copy of Sidonia the Sorceress, seemed either less real or more grotesque than before. Or could it just be that Joe had avoided paving too close attention to her face when she was awake and would have noticed him staring? The strangest thing about her face was that if you removed its most obvious features, such as the eyes and the mouth, you wouldn't have known from the hollows and bulges that were left where to replace the features you'd removed. If Coughdrop hadn't been introduced to Joe as a possible marriage partner, he probably wouldn't have developed this squeamish fascination with the poor girl's unfortunate appearance. People shouldn't be blamed for something they can't help, like the way they look, as her mother would have pointed out if she'd still been around. She'd also have pointed out that Coughdrop was a very skilled and rapid reader, while Joe was an illiterate.

Or was he? Bart had told him the meaning of the message on the first page of the book, which meant that with those new letters and the B he'd figured out by himself he now knew all twenty-five letters of the alphabet, at least in theory. Which meant that if he tried hard enough, he should be able to read any message in his blue book.

There was only one way to find out. He opened the book to page three, where, putting blanks in place of the letters that Joe hadn't gotten around to learning properly, he read the following words of advice:

The letter he didn't know in the first word was the same as the one in the third, and the same as the third letter in the word DON'T on the first page of his book. So the sound he had to fit in place was nnnn, in which case Joe was willing to bet he knew what the whole message meant without even checking out the other two letters. which were, as you have probably figured out yourself, Y and U. The message meant: "Need a friend to set you free? Dial 911-1913."

Joe took his phone out of his hat and dialed.

The phone rang five times, and then a woman's voice answered brightly, "Parking Lot Cafe." Before Joe could tell her he must have dialed a wrong number, she was rattling off the Parking Lot Cafe's slogan:

"You work as hard as you are able.

We park your car and set your table!"

Then in an ordinary, tired tone of voice she asked, "Can I help you?"

"Well, um, I, uh, don't know how to explain this. I'm, uh, calling a friend of mine, only I, uh, don't know his name "

"Better run through that again," said the woman at the Parking Lot Cafe.

"Or it might be ber name, I don't really know, I'm just calling the number here in the book that I've got."

"In Surewould Forest."

"Where are you?" the woman asked.

"Oh, then you probably want Loser. He goes off there at least once a week. Loser!" she shouted. "It's for you."

After a long wait another voice said, "Zuhmattuh?" Joe decided to take the directest approach possible, since that seemed to be the way things were done here. "Loser," he said, "I'm in a jam and I need help."

"Wh'f'ck are ya?" Loser asked, blurring his words in such a way that Joe couldn't tell if he was asking who the f'ck or where the f'ck he was.

"Tm in Surewould Forest," he said, "right by the signpost just past the main entrance on Fifth Avenue, and I'm locked in a cage."

"Well, f*ck that sht_u " said Loser, and hung up. γ Joe was not sure if this meant Loser was coming or not, but there didn't seem to be any point in calling the number back. If Loser intended to help him, he knew where he was. So the only thing to do now was settle down and . . .

And what? What are the possibilities when you're locked in a cage? Joe fidgeted. He twiddled his thumbs. He peeked ahead at the next page of the book and puzzled over the words there until they refused to fall into a pattern that made any sense. Then he decided he would do some isometric exercises, using the bars of the cage. He did some chin-ups, though they had to be partial chin-ups since the bars were too close together to get his head through them. He was able, however, to swing around upside-down and get his feet through the bars at the top of the cage and hang by his heels. While he was hanging by his heels he realized that the floor of his cage was grass just the same as the floor of the forest. Which meant that if he tried to tip the cage over, he could get out the bottom end! It all depended on whether the cage was tippable.

Joe got a good grip on two bars at the base of the cage and did a quick clean-and-jerk, using his thigh muscles and his biceps together for one all-out burst of strength that toppled the cage to its side like a litter barrel hit by a city bus. Joe crawled out what used to be the bottom end of the cage, feeling really bright for having got out by himself and really dumb for having taken so long to figure out something so simple.

He was just tipoceing down the path that led into the trolls' part of Surewould Forest when, from the other direction on the same path, a woman appeared in a big red wig, she was wearing a tight red dress with sequins sewn on it, and she swung a bulky sequined shopping bag as she walked along, Seeing Joe ahead of her the path, she called our cheerfully: "Yoo-hoo! You there! Stop right there—I've got a free sample for you if you'll take the time to answer a few short questions."

Joe raised a finger to his lips and pointed toward Coughdrop. "She's sleeping," he whispered. "We mustn't wake her."

"I wish I could sleep," said the woman, who seemed, close up, a little dowdy despite her fantastic clothes.

She also seemed vaguely familiar, like someone you pass on the street and you know she is either a teller at a bank you used to bank at or works in a bakery you often walk past but seldom go inside. Usually in such cases there's no need to rack your memory, best just to let it pass, and so Joe did.

"But," the woman went on, "I can't punch out till I've got my quota for the day, and I'm nowhere near it. So if you would take just a moment to answer a few questions. I'd be grateful."

"What kind of questions?" Joe asked suspiciously. He wasn't usually a suspicious sort of person, but he couldn't help being reminded of how he'd got into such trouble playing the "witch's quiz game"—to quote the first page of his book.

"Just a few simple questions about your brand preferences. You see, I am the Goddess Fortuna, and I represent the American Tuna Fish Research Bureau. Would you tell me, please . . ." The Goddess took a questionnaire from her shopping hag and held a felt-tip pen in readiness to check the appropriate box. " . . . the leading brands of tuna fish that you would expect to find stocked in the supermarket where you shop?"

Joe closed his eyes, trying to reconstruct in his memory the aisle of the Berkley-Jove 7-11 where the tuna fish would be stocked, but not being much of a consumer of tuna fish or of any other product requiring the effort of heating a can, due to the lack of cooking facilities at the Dyer Street Residence Hotel, Joe couldn't remember any part of the store but the deli counter and the convenience rotunda. He could, however, remember ads for tuna fish that he'd seen repeated on tv over and over again. Suddenly it came to him why the Goddess seemed so familiar: she was the same Goddess for Tuna who delivered the ten-second spots for all the different competing brands. In her ads the sequins looked more like fish scales than sequins, and her red wig was less in need of treatment with Glamorene. Despite which Ioe couldn't help feeling a little lucky and overawed, seeing her this close up. It wasn't every day he met a Goddess or any other kind of celebrity, for that matter.

"Can't you think of a *single* brand of tuna fish?" the Goddess pleaded.

"Oh. Right. Sure. A brand of tuna, let me think. How about Pigeon o' the Sea?"

The Goddess smiled and checked a box on her questionnaire. "Very good. And can you repeat some slogan associated with that product—or possibly sing its jingle?"

"Oh, I'm not much of a singer," said Joe with false modesty.

"Just sing as best you can."

Joe cleared his throat and, forgetting all about not wanting to wake up Coughdrop, belted out the following familiar song.

"For tuna crisp as celery,

For tuna that's a rhapsody And has a four-year warranty, Fortuna says, Be finicky: Buy freeze-dried, Deep-fried,

U.S.D.A.-certified
Pigeon, Pigeon, Pigeon o' the Sea!"

"Why, you've got a beautiful voice," said the Goddess, setting her questionnaire down on a convenient tree stump and taking up her shopping bag. "And I have a special premium for you right here in my . . ." She burrowed deeper into the contents of the sequinted shopping bag. "Now where the dickens are those— Why is it that when you're looking for— No, that's not it, that's for the lip balm survey. Ah, here!"

She presented Joe with a 61/2-ounce can of Pigeon o' the Sea Chunk Style Tuna Fish. "Bear in mind," said the Goddess, "that this is no ordinary can of tuna. Only

open it when you are-

She was interrupted by a cry of alarm from the awakened Coughdrop, who, having rubbed the sleep-seeds from her eyes, had just become aware that Joe had overturned the cage and escaped.

"What'th thith?" she shrilled. "What do I thee? You! What'th-Your-Name!" she pointed at Joe. "Get back intide that cage. My mother will be furiouth if she findth out I let you ethcape."

"Young lady," said the Goddess calmly, "now that your awake, I wonder if you would mind answering a few short questions." She took up her questionnaire and held her felt-tip pen in readiness. "First, could you tell me the leading brands of tuna fish that you would expect to find stocked in the supermarket where you shop?"

"Are you inthane?" Coughdrop shrieked at the Goddess. "Here ith my fianthe ethcaped from hith cage, and

you athk me about tuna fish!

"Could you excuse me now?" said Joe politely to the Goddess. "I appreciate the free sample, but I've got to be heading elsewhere."

"Elhewhere! Elhewhere! You thay right where you are! I'm thending a thignal to my mother, and when she getth here, your goothe will be cooked." She turned to the Goddess. "And I though! I thaw you giving out free thampleth. How about thomething for me?"

"The samples are for those who answer my questions. I don't do this for my health, you know. I've got a quota to meet."

Joe was just setting off again when there was a sudden terrible roar that seemed to come from every direction at once. Then down the path from the main entrance, doing wheelies and raising great clouds of dust, came a triple-extended, scallop-bottomed, 2500cc parachromed Harley-Davidson Blue-Chip Chopper.

Loser had come to Joe's rescue!

Chapter Nine

The Enchanted Biker

After a couple of purely ornamental roars unrelated to is mechanical operation, the triple-extended, para-chromed Chopper came to a stop, and the man who had been spreadeagled on its throbbing water-saddle dismounted and approached Joe. He was not in himself a person who would have made you uneasy if he'd approached you on an empty street in a dangerous neighborhood late at night, being no taller than Joe, with a mustache and a beard too meager to disguise either his acne problem or the weaselish look of his face. Weasels might object that some weasels have very fierce dispositions and are rightly regarded with trepidation by their prev, but Loser had more the look of a weasel who was being hunted rather than of one who was doing the hunting. However, if you didn't look at his face or think about his scrawny body but considered instead the little arsenal of chains, wrenches, grenades, and bandoliers draped over his shredded clothes, or if you read the messages on the buttons or interpreted the symbolic meaning of the patches holding those clothes together, then he made a formidable impression.

"You the bro who phoned me at the f*ck*ng Parking Lot?" he asked, offering an extended middle finger for a biker handshake.

Joe, though he was not now nor had ever been a biker, had seen plenty of tv shows about bikers. At certain hours of the night there wasn't much else to watch on tv. So Joe knew what to do. He hooked his own middle finger around Loser's, brought his elbow up against Loser's selbow, and with his other hand threw a punch at Loser's stomach, but not too hard in case it should connect. Which it didn't, since Loser caught the punch with his free hand, then spit in Joes's face. Joe might at that point have spit in Loser's face, if he'd wanted to, in which case Loser would have thrown a punch at him. That was optional. They did not French kis, however, since that part of the handshake was reserved for bros who'd served time or committed a felony together.

"What the f*ck," said Joe with a friendly smile. He was careful not to wipe Loser's spit from his forehead, even though he could feel it trickling down into his eyebrow.

"What the f*ck," said Loser. "Doesn't look like you needed my f*ck*ng help at all. You're already out of your f*ck*ng cage. What the f*ck."

"What the f*ck," Joe agreed. "But I'm glad you came anyway. What do you say, let's split, okay?"

"Thplit!" spluttered Coughdrop. "Thplit! You'll do nothing of the thort! You'll thtay right here till midnight and then you'll marry me, just like Mother thaid."

She dashed forward to prevent her intended bride-

groom's departure by main force, but before she could grab hold of Joe's red polyester shorts Loser gave her a sidelong blow with the back of his hand that sent her sprawling backward onto the grass. "Monther!" she screamed in an ecstasy of indignation.

"Beatht! Thavage!"

"Hey," said Loser with a grin, "you're kinda cute yourself. Now f*ck off, why don't ya? Me and my bro are heading to a f*ck*ng rally. Right, bro?"

"What the f*ck," said Joe, who was willing to go anywhere away from Coughdrop.

"One moment, if you will, sir," said the Goddess Fortuna to Loser. "Before you go off, I wonder if you would mind answering a few simple questions." She poised her felt-tip pen above her questionnaire. "First, could you tell me the leading brands of tuna fish that you would expect to find stocked in the supermarket where you shop?"

"What the f*ck," said Loser in a thoughtful tone. "How about Texaco?"

"Very good." The Goddess checked a box on the questionnaire. "And can you repeat some slogan associated with that brand—or possibly sing its jingle?"

"Lemme think. How about:

"For tuna that will never spoil Try tuna cured in Texacoil."

"Thank you very much," said the Goddess. She dipped ifto her shopping bag and brought out a 3-ounce can of Texaco Economy Tuna Shreds. "Here's your free sample, and now if you'll excuse me I'll be off."

The Goddess took the path that led to the elves' bookshop, and Joe got on the wobbling water-saddle of the Harley behind Loser, who gave a kick to the starter and a twist to the handgrip. The engine went VROOM, the front wheel lifted a foot off the ground, the back wheel plowed into the forest path, and with a final scream of protest from Coughdrop Joe was on his way down the road to thrills, spills, action and adventure.

But not on his way, it seemed, to the trolls' part of the forest, for Loser had taken the path marked DORKS. There was no way Joe could ask him why they were heading into dork country, not over the roar of the Harley, so Joe just hung on tight and tried to figure out what the letters meant that were sewn on the back of Loser's jacket. However, without being able to check the letters he didn't know yet, such as W and M, against the message on page one of his blue book, he couldn't get anywhere. At last he just turned off his mind and enjoyed

But even that wasn't so easy to do, since the path they were driving on, being designed for hikers rather than bikers, was too full of bumps and twists and low-hanging branches. Whenever they hit a bump, the water-saddle would react like water in a waterbed when two people hit the wrong rhythm of lovernaking—first a think of connection to the metal frame, then a whoosh of watery backlash. Loser also seemed a little unsure how far to lean into a turn at low speed, and at one particularly sharp bend of the path, where the wrong speed and the wrong sideways-leaning angle coincided with a sudden dip and then a rise, the Chopper went over and the two riders sailed over its handlebars into a ujant dandelion bush.

Nowadays, as you know if you've ever had to take care of a lawn, dandelions rarely grow to be more than a few inches high. They're pesky in their own way, but they don't amount to an obstacle. In the future, however, because of Evolution, dandelions grow in busbes that sometimes climb to heights of eight or nine feet. You may not be interested in botany or gardening, but there are readers who are, so try not to become impatient when a few details about the plants in Surewould Forest are included from time to time. For one thing, the readers who like the gardening data might not give two hoots about the future development of Harley-Davidson motories.

cycles, so just remember—it takes all kinds. For another thing, there's a reason for mentioning that dandelion bush besides its interest to the gardeners among you, since it will come to play a small but essential part in the story, though not until nearer the end of the chapter.

"F*ck*ng h*ll," said Loser as he got to his feet, looking pale and shaken.

"What the f*ck," Joe said in a tone that suggested, one, that he didn't blame Loser's bad driving for the accident and, two, that they were lucky to be alive.

Bikers of the future, like bikers today, have an obligation always to fit at least one obscene word into everything they say. It's a kind of challenge to Alecto and the other witches of W.A.R.T.—which, as I should have explained before, stands for Witches Against Rough Talk a way of daring them to do something about it. And because bikers usually have knives and guns and travel in packs, few whiches do take up their challenge.

Readers of this story must not get the wrong impression. I am not advocating the indiscriminate use of rough talk, certainly not at a ratio of one obscenity per sentence. At the same time it seems only fair to say that sometimes rough talk does the job when nothing else can, such as at moments of emotion so powerful that you can't put a real sentence together. As in most things, there is probably a middle way that avoids the extremes of WART. on the one hand and bikers on the other. I only bring up the issue at all by way of excusing myself to those readers who would rather not have to be made to imagine the way bikers talk. For these readers I can at least hold out this promise: that the bikers in this story will probably come to unhappy ends, one way or another, just as they do in real life.

Joe's use of such language is another matter, of course. Surely no one would want bim to come to an unhappy end, not when he's the hero of the story. There's an old saying that may excuse some of his rough talk, which is, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Whether that's enough of an excuse, I can't really say. I would just ask readers who are feeling fussed to hold their horses and not to judge loe too harshly till all the facts are in.

Attentive readers will already have noticed that the author and editors, in deference to the demands of W.A.R.T., have scrupulously and delicately deleted the vowels from all the rough talk appearing in this book, including (as you will soon see all the names of the Wild F*ck*ng Animals, lest those who have never before encountered rough talk should, by reading these pages, experience the loss of their innocence.

Meanwhile, back beside that dandelion bush, Loser, who wasn't all that eager to hop back into the water-saddle, noticed that Joe was carrying a survival pack. "Hev. bro, got any good sh't in that sack?" he asked.

"Nothing much," said Joe. "Some Cream of Wheat and sh*t like that."

"Ain't they no f°ck*ng Coke?"

"There's a can of it," Joe admitted.

"Well then, f*ck man, what are we f*ck*ng waiting for Let's snort!"

for? Let's snort!"

Reluctantly, for he didn't think it would improve Los-

er's driving, Joe took out his can of Coke, popped it open, stuck his nose into the opened nosehole, and took a deep snort. Instantly the leaves of the forest turned a livelier green, and his brain started fizzing with little exclamation points: Hey! Wow! Whee! Bip! Bong! Ding! Do it again! Do it again!

He was just about to follow the fizzing's irresistible advice when Loser grabbed the can from him. "Even f'ck'ng Steven, bro. All for one and . . ." He took a long snort of the Coke, held it in his lungs, and breathed out. ". fin for all!"

At this point Loser began giggling. Which—not his joke but his giggling—seemed so funny to Joe that he started busting up too. Then Loser began crying, which struck Joe as even funnier, until he realized that Loser's tears were the genuine article.

"Hey, Loser, what the f*ck's the matter, man?"

"What the f*ck's the matter is my f*ck*ng *ss, man,

'cause I've got to ride in the f'ck'ng rally, man, this f'ck'ng affermon, man, and I can't. I can't ride this f'ck'r worth f'ck'ng sh't, man, and that's a fact. You saw me take that spill? Do you think anyone else would have spilled on this turn? No, man, only me, 'cause I'm f'ck'ng worthless, man, worthless."
He started crying again, and Joe, who always got

racked up seeing grown-ups cry, put his arm around him and tried to think of something positive to say.

"Who says you got to ride in the f*ck*ng rally, Loser? Can't you just call in sick or something?"

"Who says is the Animals, man."

"Who?"

Loser twisted sideways so Joe could see the letters forming a wreath around the snarling tiger's-head sewn to the denim and holding it together. "The Wild F*ck"ng Animals, man, of f*ck*ng whom I am the youngest f*ck-"ng prospect. Which means," he added sorrowfully, "that I am f*ck*ng f*ck*d."

Joe didn't know if it was the Coke or a genuine intellectual leap, but suddenly all the letters on the back of Loser's jacket made perfect sense to him. The W in WLD was the same, he remembered now, as the first letter in WITCH, and they both made the same windy sort of SOUND on the World of the SOUND of the World of SOUND ANNAIS, and had the same sound you could hear in money or maniac or lame or same or Sam or Gimme some more Cobe!

"Okay, okay," said Loser. "Don't freak, here's your loke."

Joe sucked in the last bit of fizz from the can and then took a long gurgling swallow of the liquid extender, which was designed to extend the experience though it could also string you out, depending on what other chemicals were already present in your system.

"Hey, man, save some of that p*ss for me," Loser pleaded.

"Mmm," said Joe. "Mmm, right." He passed the can, less than half full, to Loser, who killed it.

"You know, man," said Loser, "I been thinking." "Mmm." said Ioe.

"Shall I tell you what I been thinking?"

"Mmm.

"I been thinking you'd be a f*ck*ng good prospect, man."

"Mmm."

"You know, man? For the Animals, man."
"Mmm."

"But first, you know, you got to pass their f*ck*ng initiation, man. Which you could do, man, if you took my colors and wore them to the rally. What do you think, man?"

"Mmm."

Loser slipped off the raggedy sleeveless jacket with all its buttons and patches. "Hey, man, come on, lift your arm."

Come had that sound, and arm did too. "Mmm, mmm." Loser eased first Joe's right arm through an armhole, then his left. He hung the bandoliers over his shoulders, and strapped the belt with all the hardware hanging from it around his hips. He stood back to survey the effect. "With a f'ck'ng helmet on, man, no one would ever know you wasn't me. Not even the f'ck'ng scriptwriters, man, because all we have to do now is switch our f'ck'ng pisms. Then while you are riding down my track, I can be riding down yours. We'll swap our f'ck'ng destinies, man!"

He laughed gleefully, though he didn't go on to explain that the destiny he was so gleeful to be swapping was the one embedded in his name and spelled out by the button on the left-hand breast pocket of his jacket, Born to Lose.

While Joe was thinking this through for himself, Loser slipped his own entertainment pin out of his pierced earlobe and replaced it with the pin he pulled out of Joe's stovepipe hat.

With no pin in his hat the sky above the leaves started darkening again, and the pleasant humming of M's that had been going on all this while in Joe's Coked head mised its pitch to something closer to a buzz. Joe wondered which of the twenty-five letters was the one that made that sound.

"You know, man," said Loser, "you ought to get your fekting ear pierced like mine. Cause you can't wear that fekting stovepipe hat to the fekting rally. Not if you're going to have a fekting helmet on. So what I'll do—" He reached forward suddenly and removed the hat from Joe's head. When Joe offered no protest, he put it on his own head, which was evidently much smaller, for only his ears seemed to keep the hat from settling right down to his shoulders.

"So, do you want me to do that for you now?" Loser asked.

Do what? Joe wondered dreamily. Most of his attention was still directed to the problem of which letter made a buzzing sound. Maybe if he looked in his book . . .

This slow-moving train of thought was derailed by a blast of Coke-amplified pain as Loser pushed his own entertainment pin through the flesh of Joe's earlobe. Along with the pain was an explosion in the dark part of Joe's mind that he could usually only see with his eyes closed—an explosion of Z's, thousands of blazing

ZIs, just like—he realized—the Z at the end of QUIZ, or the two big red ZIs in the sign over Pizza Bill's Pizzaria, or the ZIs there must be in Eczon's E-Z-Off Zit Cleaner, which was a product that Loser really ought to be informed of.

Before Joe could quite focus on telling Loser the good news that medical science had found the solution to his acne problem, a second wave of pain exploded in his head, like the thunder that comes after a flash of lightning. It cleared away all the Z's and the M's behind them and left Joe looking at Surewould Forest from a totally different point of view. Because now instead of being in his own script, based on his own background and needs, as determined by an entire lifetime of data stored at the Innacity Central Data Bank, he was in Loser's script, and Loser had led a very different life from Joe's and didn't even see such basic things as trees and grass and bushes the way Joe did. For one thing, Loser was the opposite of innocent. Life had played some rotten tricks on Loser, and when he'd tried to retaliate he was shafted. As a result he'd got into the habit of expecting rotten tricks and shaftings. If he saw a tree or a bush, he was always half expecting someone to be hiding behind it, someone who had it in for him, someone nasty.

And so there was. For there behind the dandelion bush I mentioned earlier was Coughdrop. Coughdrop may have had some real personality problems, but you've got to admit that lack of gumption wasn't one of them. She had followed the trail torn up by the powerful Harley all this way, running as fast as her little dwarf legs allowed her, and here she was, gasping and panting, hiding behind the drooping yellow clusters of dandelions, and getting ready to cast an enchantment on the man she meant to make her husband.

Her eyes rolled up till only the whites were showing, and she thrust her arms forward in the direction of Joe and Loser. A dim blue light formed at the tips of her supernumerary fingers, and then there was a bright electrical Blooey! like the Blooey! of a light bulb at the moment it dies. A bolt of blue lightning passed through the bush, crisping its blossoms and striking Joe's entertainment pin—which was lodged, you will recall, in Loser's ear.

Loser screamed once, then stood stiffly to attention, like an army recruit under the gaze of his drill sergeant.

Coughdrop set in motion a small crystal pendant that hung from the end of a silver chain. As the crystal pendulum swung back and forth she shrilled the words of her incantation:

My thoughtth rehearthe A nonthenthe curthe

My thentheth thpin Gold out of thin

> My thinth are trowelth To thtuff my bowelth

> > My bowelth are chainth About my brainth

My brain commandth Obedient handth

> My handth are caught In wheelth of thought

"And now," she shrieked, "reverthe the curthe! Reverthe!"

Loser, now fully under the lady dwarf's immobilizing spell, recited the verses of the curse backward, as though his words were the backward swing of a long, long pendulum, a pendulum made not of crystal but of words:

> A nonsense curse My thoughts reverse

In wheels of thought My hands are caught

Obedient hands My brain commands

About my brains My bowels are chains

To stuff my bowels My sins are trowels

Gold out of sin My senses spin

A nonsense curse My thoughts reverse.

"Onthe more, my dear fianthé, and you shall be my prithoner more thecurely than any cage of iron or steel could ever make you. Onthe more, rethite with me: My thoughth rehearthe..."

"My thoughtth rehearthe," Loser repeated in a voice drained of all character, a voice that copied even the distortions of Coughdrop's lisp.

"A nonthenthe curthe," she prompted.

"A nonthenthe curthe," Loser's lifeless voice repeated.

Chapter Ten

D**th's Tragic Secret

Once Coughdrop had satisfied herself that Loser's mind was securely locked into the endless repetition, backward and forward, forward and back, of her enchantment, she retraced her steps along the forest path back to where she'd left *Sidonia the Sorceress* spread open on the grass, for she had no wish to contend with the biker who'd already behaved so brutally to her. You see, she didn't realize that it was Loser, wearing Joe's hat on his head and Joe's pin in his ear, who had fallen under the

spell of the Nonsense Curse, while it was Joe, in Loser's ragged clothes and with his back to the dandelion bush, who had been looking on.

Joés reaction to all this was pretty much what yours or mine would have been—he wanted to clear out. That was likewise the signal he was receiving through the pin stuck in his poor bleeding earlobe. There was the powerful Chopper. There was the path into the forest. He'd never driven a Harley before, since they cost well over a hundred million dollars, which was all Joe could hope to earn in two years, even if he were paid for overtime, which he wasn't. But over the years he must have seen a thousand bikers starting up a thousand Choppers in a thousand pixenile terrorism tv series, and he knew it was as simple as 1, 2, 3.

- 1. Kick the big red knob in front of your right foot.
- Twist the rubber grip at the end of the handlebars.
 And 3, . . . What was 3?

There was no 3. With a roar and a wheelie that gave Ioe just enough time to grab his stovepipe hat off Loser's head, he was off. The wind rippled his polyester shorts and dried up every bead of sweat on his body and blew all his thoughts out of his head, which filled up with a beautiful deep throbbing that no letter of the alphabet, singly or in combination with any other, could ever have described. His forward motion forced his body into the water-saddle until he was laid back at the angle of a single slice of pizza in a pie that's been cut into eight slices. A funny vibration went up from the base of his spine and did a kind of loop-the-loop inside his head, where it turned into one of Joe's favorite non-objective public service ads, the ad for having fun. Son of a gun, the ad blared as it spun around in his head, we're baving fun and when we're done we've just begun to have more fun, more fun, more fun, more fun! The ad melted into the roar of the 2500cc engine, and Joe's consciousness joined in the joyful up-and-down four-stroke cycle of the Harley's sixteen singing cylinders

Until it stopped.

For that is the nature of fun, pretty much. It's bubbling up inside of you and you're feeling terrific, and then it stops and you wonder what's happened and where the fun has gone.

Wherever the fun had gone. Joe had landed in a big field of mud. Some parts of the field had patches of waterlogged grass, as though a flood had covered a suburban lawn and not completely retreated, while other parts were mud pure and simple. The Chopper had gone down in one of the grassy parts, and now it was doing its imitation of a lawn sprinkler as its back wheel tore up globs of soft, soupy lawn and sent them flying into the faces of the people who were having a party in this morass. These people were the other six members of the Wild F*ck*ng Animals-D**th, F*ck, Sh*t, P*ss, C*nt, N*k*-and the four members of the Animals' Old Ladies' Auxiliary-Wh*r*, B*tch, T*ts, and *ss. As the missiles of mud pelted them, the bikers and their old ladies laughed good-naturedly and guzzled Buds and sang a traditional bikers' drinking song.

Traditional Bikers' Drinking Song

Sh*t, F*ck, Sha-Na-Na. We eat our potatoes raw.

P*ss, D*ck, Siss-Boom-Bah. Animals defy the law.

N*k*, D**th, Nyah, nyah, nyah. Knuckles need to smash a jaw.

Wh*r*, B*tch, Oo-Wa-Wa.

White man want a swarthy squaw.

T"ts, "ss,
OchLa-La.
Give your teeth some meat to gnaw.
Hurrah!
Hurrah!
Hurrah!

Joe was appalled, as I'm sure you must be, but then, being pretty adaptable, he decided that live-and-let-live was still a basically okay philosophy, until such a time as he found himself in actual physical danger, at which point he would have to rethink his position. Meanwhile, having a good tenor voice and liking to use it, Joe joined in the singing, and when the waitress for the Mud Puddle Club-for it turned out that he'd driven right into the middle of an outdoor restaurant-came around with another round of Buds, Joe lifted his glass in a toast to the spirit of the occasion and unloosed a gigantic f*rt, which made all the other bikers-D**th, F*ck, Sh*t, P*ss, C*nt, N*k*-and their old ladies-Wh*r*, B*tch, T*ts, and *sslaugh and clap their hands with merriment and unloose their own flatus, which is what you call the gas that f*rts are made of.

"Hey, Loser," said D**th, the leader, warlord, and spiritual guide of the Wild F*ck*ng Animals, "is that you? Welcome f*ck*ng home, bro. Where you been?"

Didn't they know, Joe wondered, that he wasn't really Loser? And if they didn't, should he tell them? No, Joe decided, and no—they didn't, and he wouldn't, on the basic assumption that his identity was an open book to anyone genuinely interested and otherwise none of the Wild P'ck'ng Animals' business.

What's your opinion? If people assume that you're someone or something you're really not, are you willing to go along with their mistake just to make things easier, or do you feel you have to explain right away that no, you are not a Republican, or a vegetarian, or a fan of Marion Zimmer Bradley, or a Capricorn, or someone potentially interested in Scientology or Karl Popper or The Who? On the one hand you want to avoid useless arguments and on the other you don't want to be suckered into making a contribution or eating mushy brown rice

for dinner or feeling obliged to read a book you know you'll hate. It is a common dilemma in a culture as di-verse as ours, and one that would take a whole book of etiquette to do justice to. That's not to say the question is unanswerable, only that life goes on, and our story with it, including the necessity to say something about each of no less than ten new characters.

As a reader whose primary interest in this book is finding out what will happen to Joe, you might be inclined to relieve me of that necessity. You might be willing to imagine the ten of them-D**th, F*ck, Sh*t, P*ss, C*nt, N*k*, Wh*r*, B*tch, T*ts, and *ss-as being all more or less cut from the same mold. But that would not be fair to them as individuals. Even when we belong to groups that try to dress and act and think alike, as most of us do, even then we're individuals, as different one from the other as the names of the bikers and their old ladies and the objects or ideas those names represent. Furthermore, each of the Wild F*ck*ng Animals and their Old Ladies' Auxiliary, like each of us, had good qualities that you would never have imagined or noticed so long as you saw them as a group. And since it's generally a good idea to look for the best in people rather than the worst, it will be those unexpected good qualities of the ten of them that I'll point out by way of introduction.

D**h, for instance, though there wasn't much to be said in his favor from an ethical point of view, had once been considered rather good-looking, and though his hair was receding now, and he was getting fat, and his gums had contracted a disease causing them to shrink and expose rather too much of his teeth, he did still, even so, carry himself with a certain panache only to be seen in people who think themselves the focus of approving attention.

F'ck could not have been called good-looking by any streth of the imagination, but he did genuinely make it his concern that his sexual partners should have a good time as well as himself, and that is always to be commended. In fact, if F'ck hadn't been a wild F'ck'ng Animal, he'd have been a fairly nice guy. But dumb? Dumb as a nematode.

Sh't was physically repulsive and a sexual disaster area, but he was, in his own way, honest. He could have claimed, along with George Washington, that he never told a lie. That degree of honesty is never an unmixed blessing, neither for the person who doesn't lie nor for the person he doesn't lie to, for as almost everyone else but sh't is well aware, honesty isn't always the best policy. Still, if you were looking for something good to say about sh't, that would have to be it.

P'ss drank more than was good for him, but he would pass the bottle on ungrudgingly, and when he passed out in a stupor, as he quite often did, he usually found somewhere inconspicuous to pass out in, which showed consideration.

C'nt was mean-tempered, selfish, treacherous, and subject to vivid paranoid delusions, such as the conviction that a stranger walking along behind him was intending to kill him. However, there was no one you'd rather have at your side in a knife fight, because he was fast and accurate. N'k' was called N'k' because he had tattoos of n'cl'*r mushrooms tattooe all over his body. D'rih, who was his older brother, insisted they weren't n'cl'*r mushrooms at all but e'cks of various sizes and that N'k' was a f'gg't. That wasn't true. N'k's all-foonsuming passion—which, be it said to his credit, he did his level best to repress was for tickling and murdering children of either sex. Of all the bikers N'k' was the cleanest, the smartest, and, usually, the best-behaved.

Wh*r*, at 34, was the oldest of the Old Ladies and the most skilled in the arts of love, with regard to both speed and efficiency. If martyrdom is something to admire, then Wh*r* could be admired as a martyr to her idea of freedom, which was to be as offensive as possible to all the quiet-spoken, clean-living, law-abiding members of the church she'd been brought up in which was the First National Church of Secular Humanism, Secular Humanists didn't have to believe in anything that required much faith, only in being polite, so Where had not had much choice in the matter of adolescent rebellion. Freedom for Wh*r* meant the freedom to scream "F*ck off!" into the wind as she rocketed down the highway on the back end of a Harley-Davidson Blue Chip Chopper doing 50 miles an hour. To you and me that might not seem very fast, but by the year 2992 the fuel crisis had got so bad that the maximum speed limit had been lowered to 35 miles an hour. But don't feel sorry for Wh*r* on that account. Speed is relative, along with most everything else, as Albert Einstein proved a long time ago.

For B*tch, belonging to the Old Ladies' Auxiliary was more a matter of family tradition than of rebellion. She'd been raised till age ten in a bikers' commune and thereafter in the Innacity Home of Detention, where she had done time for assault with intent, for manslaughter, for arson, and for child abuse. She had learned to embroider terribly well in her years in prison, and now, at 17, she was almost finished working on a panel for the back of D*th's denim jacket that was, in his words, "a f*ck*ng state-of-the-art masteroirec."

T'ts was dependable, energetic, intelligent, a fair cook and a provident housekeeper. She worked as a check-out clerk at a supermarket, a job that allowed her to steal groceries, which would otherwise have been in short supply among the bikers, who, as a matter of macho pride, spent all the money their old ladies brought in as pr'st'-t'cs on b'z', and d'p'. Why, you may wonder, should such a capable person as T'ts waste her time and energy on the Wild Fek'ng Animals' Because for some completely inexplicable reason she was in love with Sh't. And there's no arguing with love.

"ss's great virtue was an inflexible devotion to principle. Not in her case the principle of honesty, for she was ready to lie and cheat twenty-four hours a day, but the principle that abortion is always and under all circumstances as wrong as wrong can be. Since the age of 13, as a direct result of this principle, she had produced no less than seven children, many severely handicapped. Her eldest son, Pr*ck, whose father was F*ck, had gone to the same day care center that Joe had been brought up in. The longer you live in a big city the more you discover what a small world it really is. There probably isn't a single one of us who probably isn't two handshakes away, at most, from the President, or if not the President, someone equally important.

So there they are, all ten of them, individuals every one, and there they were, wallowing in the mud of the Mud Puddle Club, and making jokes that weren't the least bit funny, except sometimes for D**th's, and laughing uproariously themselves, and in general making a spectacle of themselves, which was their intention and what the Mud Puddle Club was there for.

And there was D**th, poking at his infected gums with a wooden match and waiting for an answer to the question he'd asked Ioe.

"Where have I been?" Joe repeated the question. "Nowhere. Out riding."

D**th squinted at him and wedged his toothpick into the gap between two lower teeth, wincing with the pain. "What's with your face?"

"My face?" Joe raised his hand to his chin as though he might find the answer there. "I, uh, used some E-Z-Off."

"You shaved off your f*ck*ng beard," said D**th accusingly.

"Oh, leave the kid alone," said Wh'r', reaching into D**th's fly while she eved Joe's. "So he shaved his f*ck-*ng beard. You got to admit he looks one hundred percent better. Doesn't he, Sh*t?"

Sh*t wiped mud out of his eyes and considered the question on its merits. "Two hundred percent," was his verdict, and since Sh*t never lied, that settled it.

"You nervous?" D**th asked Joe.

"Nervous? Me? No. Why should I be nervous?"

"About the rally."

"Oh, yeah, the rally. Sh"t no, I'm not nervous about the rally.

"An hour ago when I phoned your f*ck*ng Parking Lot Cafe, you wouldn't even come to the f'ck'ng phone. I got the idea you might not be showing up here, man."

"And miss the f*ck*ng rally? Not on your f*ck*ng life!" "Sh*t was even thinking you might be scared, man,"

D**th hinted darkly. "Sh*t's full of sh*t, man. What's to be scared of?"

"D**th, I suppose," said D**th with a grin.

"Oh," said Joe. And then, because that didn't seem a tough enough response, "Well, you only live once. Right?"

"Right!" said D**th. He slapped Joe on the back, "That's the kind of attitude I like to hear from a Wild F*ck*ng Animal."

He reached up to take a pitcher of beer from the tray of a passing waitress and poured half of its contents over Joe's head in a spirit of grungey fun. Then, after the bartender had thrown him a Live-Action Pornotronic Black Forest Brand Beer Stein for Ioe, he filled up his own and Joe's steins with the rest of the beer. Activated by the temperature differential of the beer, the figures on the beer steins began to perform their various, unvarying sexual acts. Genitalia thrust and squeezed, tongues licked, b**bs bobbed, and little cooing noises were emitted from the rubbery red lips on the brim.

"You've been a good son to me, Loser," said D**th. "The best f*ck*ng son any f*ck*ng dad ever had."

Ioe couldn't think of a way to fit an obscenity into saying, "Thanks, Dad," which by itself sounded sentimental, so he ended up saving nothing.

"But." D"th went on, raising his chewed matchstick significantly, "there's one thing I better explain now before the f*ck*ng rally, since afterward it may be too f*ck-*ng late. You are not, in f*ck*ng fact, my f*ck*ng son." "What?"

D**th laid his right hand, which was tattooed with a skull-and-crossbones and the motto D**th Before Dishonor, on Joe's left shoulder. "You would have been my f*ck*ng son, once you was old enough to get f*ck*ng married. My f*ck*ng son-in-law, anyhow. That was how we had it planned, me and your real old man."

"Who was my real old man?" Joe asked.

D**th sighed. "He was a bro by the name of Boozer. And his old lady's name was Lucy. Put 'em together and what've you got? Loser!" D**th slapped his mud-caked thighs and guffawed.

loe, who was beginning really to resent his borrowed name, looked down at his Pornotronic Black Forest Beer Stein at just the moment that the lips on the brim decided to squirt a jet of beer into his face by way of reminding him to drink up. It got him right between the eyes.

"Thing is," D**th went on, "they neither of them lived long enough to see you born. They was both killed in the same f*ck*ng roller coaster accident that killed my f*ck*ng old lady and our f*ck*ng little girl, Gonorrhil. It was Gonorrhil that Boozer and I agreed you was to marry some day, if you turned out to be a boy. Which was something no one knew till he pulled your little f*ck*ng newborn body out of the f*ck*ng wreckage."

"Gee," said Joe, forgetting for the moment to talk like a Wild F*ck*ng Animal. "I'm sorry to hear that. It must have been a terrible experience.

"Well," said Dooth, taking a long guzzle of beer and staring mournfully at the miniature orgy winding down on the side of the stein, "like you said yourself, Loser, you only live once. Besides, it was my own f*ck*ng fault. I was the f*ck*ng mechanic in charge of the f*ck*r, and I f*ck*d up. There was these two cars, see, and the one was supposed to go like this"-D**th made a swooping roller-coaster motion with his left hand, which was tattooed with the head of a panther with a stick of lighted, dynamite between its teeth-"while the other was supposed to go like this." With his right hand he made a swooping motion at right angles to the first. "Just like two f*ck*ng cars at a f*ck*ng intersection when the f*ck*ng light changes and one of them just skins the *ss of the other. Only I screwed up the timing and instead . . .' D**th struck the palm of his left hand with his fist. "POW! It was a feckeng tragedy, man, a feckeng tragedy."

Joe nodded his solemn assent.

"So why I wanted you to know this now," D**th went on, "is 'cause I wanted to give you this." He reached up and removed a rusty metal pin from his right earlobe. The head of the pin was decorated with a skull-and-crossbones. "It's all that's left that was hers, man."

"Hers? Whose?"

"Gonorrhil's, man. I took it from her little f*ck*ng corpse when she was lying in her f*ck*ng coffin. And I want you to wear it, man, when you're out there representing your f*ck*ng bros at today's f*ck*ng rally."

Joe just had time to grit his teeth before D**th deftly plunged the pin through Joe's other earlobe, doubling his pain and making it symmetrical.

At that moment a trumpet announced that something

important was about to happen. All the Wild F*ck*ng Animals—except P*ss, who had passed out—looked up expectantly from where they were wallowing.

"Ladies and eentlemen." an announcer's voice boomed

"Ladies and gentlemen," an announcer's voice boomed out through every part of Surewould Forest, "may I have your attention please.

"The Tournament of Poses will commence in exactly fifteen minutes. All contestants are asked to report immediately to the mezzanine level of the Surewould Forest Dorkery to sign their waivers of responsibility. Thank you for your attention."

Chapter Eleven

Meanwhile, Back in the Control Room

Chapter the Seventh of Ivanboe started off with a snippet of poetry, which Albertine skipped on principle. Then Scott began to fill in background: "The condition of the English nation was at this time sufficiently miserable. King Richard was absent a prisoner, and in the power of the perficious and cruel Duke of Austria..." She liked "perficious and cruel" and the idea that a country might be either sufficiently or insufficiently miserable but didn't have much use for the potted history, so she skimmed till she got to the good part, where the scene is set for the Passage at Arms at which Ivanboe, disguised as the Disinherited Knight, would tilt at and unhorse the viel Brian de Bois-Guibert.

"The scene," Albertine read, "was singularly romantic. On the verge of a wood, which approached to within a mile of the town of Ashby, was an extensive meadow, of the finest and most beautiful green turf, surrounded on one side by the forest, and fringed on the other by straggling oak-trees, some of which had grown to an immense size."

She read with but a single eye, her left eye, while her other eye received a steady input of visual images cued by free association to the text: the Astroturf of Innacity Stadium, a tree in Oldtown Park that might not have been an oak but was certainly big, and—when the text spoke of a gate "wide enough to admit two horsemen riding abreast"—a clip from a thousand-year-old movie Albertine had first seen in an advanced course on Repressive Desublimation.

Just as, in the half of her mind devoted to Scott's romance, Prince John was making his entrance, the buzzer on her console buzzed and the flasher flashed. Without thinking, without thinking of thinking, she tongued both alarms to OFF and went on reading; in the Prince's physiognomy a dissolute audacity mingled with extreme haughtiness and indifference to the feelings of others. Just such a physiognomy—it seemed to the other, nonreading half of her mind—now froze into focus on the screen being accessed along the right-eye/left-lobe channel

"Hey, Albertine honey, put your right brain on Pause, will you? This is a priority call."

"Wha?" she said. "Who?" She blinked and shook her head to restore bilobal function.

There on the screen in front of her was the haughty and audacious physiognomy not of Prince John but of her supervisor, thesis advisor, and ex-flame, Rothbart Silverbowl. She blinked again and Silverbowl faded from haughty and audacious to frazzled, shy, and undependable.

"Oh, Bart, hi. I get so caught up sometimes. Excuse

"Caught up in what?"

She held up the spine of the book to the eye of the camera.

"Ivanboe?" Silverbowl raised an eyebrow to signify his polite demur. "Isn't that a little upscale for the likes of'—he looked down at the spec sheet on his clipboard—"Darko Dunkle?"

"I adapt," she murmured defensively. "I modify. I liddle."

Darko Dunkle was a case that Silverbowl's department had taken on for the Innacity Parcel Board. Since Dunkle was neither a paying customer nor a very resourceful criminal, the development of the young offender's scenario had been assigned to Albertine, who was the lowest-ranking member of Silverbowl's staff. She, however, was happy for any assignment that allowed her to mix in the Big Bowl, as the operation of Surewould Forest was known to the employees of United Avatars who worked in that division. Her official job description, after all, was only Receptionist Third Grade. She hoped Roth-bart hadn't come to relieve her of such a relatively agreeable duty as settling Darko Dunkle's hash. On the other hand, she knew he wouldn't have put through a priority call to discuss her rescensions of hanboe.

"How's your coleus doing?" she asked him, unable to think of a better way to avoid work-related issues. Rothbart's cubicle had a window and two hours of direct morning sunlight. It had made him an expert on coleuses.

"The coleus is fine, but that's not why I buzzed. I buzzed because we've developed a small problem. It seems that your Darko Dunkle has crossed circuits with a matinee ticket holder who's here for the first time."

"That's odd. The story seemed to be moving along smoothly enough just now, I don't know when it could have happened, unless when I went out on my break. I switched my case over to a work-situation holding pattern while I did my barre."

"In fact, that's just when it did happen. I ran a check."
"Then it's not my fault. That's standard procedure."
"I wasn't saying it was anyone's fault, my dear."
"So whose f*ck.*p was it, tell me. Judy's?"

"Mine."

"Oh." She blocked her impulse to laugh with a politely self-mocking smile.

"It doesn't matter now whose fault it is," Rothbart said in a tone of grudging forgiveness, "What matters is that we get these two dum-dums back on track. Because neither of us can clock out until both of them are out of

the Big Bowl."

"But that could take hours! And I've got a class at eight, not to mention—"

"Not to mention nothing. These things happen. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, and I promise I'll make it up to you, next week or whenever. But you've got this Joe Doe running through Dunkle's scenario, and Dunkle is locked into autistic fugue."

"Sh*t," said Albertine. Then, after thinking about it, she asked, "How did that happen, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I think I gave the boy a rather larger dose of medicine than he could handle."

"of cough medicine?" Albertine asked suspiciously, for like all of the staff members under Rothbart, she'd heard tales of Coughdrop, and had scanned the file of the poor creature who was her original and who appeared every day at the box office the moment it opened, her season ticket clutched in her hand.

"She can be a wonderful stimulus," Rothbart said defensively.

"Yeah, and she's produced a wonderful response. So then what?"

"Then, when my back was turned for a moment, and you were doing your barre, my case managed to call your case out of his holding pattern."

"Really? He must have a strong voice, this Joe Doe."

"Luck more than strength, I'd say."

"And then they crossed circuits?"

"Exactly. And when you came off your break, my boy rode off into your boy's sunset."

"Sunset! Don't I just wish! We're strictly in media res.

Unless he gets blitzed at the little contest I'm planning. The Parole Board has recommended our establishing some stronger disincentives to some of young Dunkle's antisocial inclinations."

Rothbart glanced at the Dunkle spec sheet. "Rape. Yes. Well. I'm afraid you'll have to deal with that problem another time. We can't very well blitz this Joe Doe on the other fellow's behalf. Lord knows what that would do to their circuits."

"But he's already on line. There are other people inrolved."

"Charity cases or ticket holders?"

"Both."

"Then what one of us will have to do," said Silverbowl,

plucking nervously at his bushy gray sideburns, "is intervene directly."

Albertine sighed. "That's what I thought you were

working your way around to. So, who's it to be, you or me?"

"Strictly speaking, I should scoop my own p**p," Silverbowl said evasively.

"But," she suggested.

"But," he took up the suggestion gracefully, "there are reasons why you might operate more effectively."

"You know I've never done this before."

"You have, in simulation."
"I've skied in simulation. I've dined at Buckingham.

Palace in simulation. I've done lots of things in simulation that I don't know I could do in real life."

"Albertine." said Silverbowl, in a tone of patient plead-

ing, "you and I both know—real life doesn't exist."

"Well, I'd say that was an exaggeration, but I wasn't backing out, just pointing out. Who'll take over at my console while I'm on the pin?"

Silverbowl consulted his clipboard. "Jerry'll be free in half an hour or so. Till then I thought I'd double. The Doe boy's approaching a major crisis, according to my datasheet, but I'll think of a way to stall him. He was learning the alphabet before; maybe I'll go on with that, if I can get his interest. Meanwhile, I'll have the scriptgirls put him and Dunkle under a couple hundred cc's of isochromadrine."

"Just so you don't accelerate them past my natural dream speed," cautioned Albertine. "I don't want to wake up in a ward full of zombies, and me talking in chipmunk."

"Albertine, darling"—Rothbart pantomimed a kiss— "you're saving my hide. I won't forget this. Oh, and while you're heading up to the cellblocks, why not drop off your copy of *teanboe* with my secretary? That might be fun. I haven't read Scott in ages."

Albertine doubted whether her supervisor had ever read Scott in his whole life. He stuck to the old standhys —Shakespeare, fairy tales, Greek mythology, the MGM archives. Still, it was not for her to cast the first stone. How often had she let it be understood that she'd read all of Nabokov? Of Lady Murasaki? Even, God help her, the entirety of The Faerle Queen!

With a sigh for the follies and vanities of the reading public and of people in general, she unplugged her brain from the console, picked up her copy of *tunhoe*, and set off on her own quest for love and adventure in the shadowy precincts of Surewould Forest.

Chapter Twelve

Zombies at Abandoned Hope

At the mezzanine level of the Surewould Forest Dorkery, a lady elf in a polka-dot uniform gave Joe a WR-17 Waiver of Responsibility form to fill out. Joe had never filled out any kind of form before, but this one looked easy. Under the first line was the word NAME, which was almost the same as the word GAME on the first page of his blue book, the only difference being it began with an N-sound, NAME: he was supposed to write down his name!

Nothing easier. He opened his blue book to the first page, where the very first word was his name, JOE. He

copied that onto the WR-17 form, then to make his last name copied it again, changing the J to a D. Only after it was all written in ballpoint in the biggest letters he could fit on the form did he remember that he wasn't supposed to be Joe Doe, he was supposed to be Loser.

He went back to the lady elf and asked for another form, explaining that he'd filled in the wrong name by mistake. She looked skeptical, but she gave him another form, which foe brought back to the little simulated walnut ledge provided for his convenience. Loser, he thought, had to begin with an L. Then came the hooting sound that the wise owl had told him was double-O. Then a Z. 7But what then?

"Pardon me," said Joe, turning to the man standing beside him at the ledge, "but would you know what the letters are in "Loser""

"Run that by again," the man said. He was wearing a Brandname double-breasted business suit with the Brandname brand name stitched all over the charcoal gray wool flannel in bright yellow letters. Joe found him a little intimidating.

"I said," said Joe, "how do you spell 'Loser'?"

"Why in h°ll would you want to spell 'Loser'?" the man asked in turn, with a kind of snort that went halfway to being a laugh.

"It's my name, and I have to write it on this form." This time he went the whole distance to a laugh. "Your name is—ho-ho-ho!—Loser? And you're going out there to—ho-ho-lo—compete in the tournament? Kid, let me give you a word of advice: you need a change of attitude. No, first change your name, then change your

attitude."
"That's probably good advice," said Joe, "and as a matter of fact 'Loser' is not my real name. But it is what I've got to put down on this form."

"Well, if you have to spell 'Loser,' all you've got to do is add an R to the last word on your button there." He tapped the "Born to Lose" button pinned to the flap of the left-hand pocket on foe's tacket.

"Oh," said Joe, suprised to discover that Loser had only one O, and an S instead of a Z. As for the R he was supposed to add, no one had told him the names for all the different letters, but R sounded like it ought to be the growling letter in words like Rothbart and Dork.

"There," said Joe with satisfaction when all five letters were written down on the waiver.

"That's it?" said the man in the Brandname suit, looking over his shoulder. "No one gave you a last name?"

"Oh," said Joe. "Right." He remembered what D**th had said about Loser's father, whose name must start with the blubbery letter B, the same as the B's in Rothbart Silverbowl.

Loser Boser. There, he was done.

He turned in his completed waiver to the lady elf, who stamped it and stapled it, and filed it with the other waivers in her waiver file. In return she gave Joe a coupon that entitled him to a free drink at the Abandoned Hope Lounge, a bar reserved for the exclusive use of contestants in the Tournament of Poses.

Joe was just setting off in the direction of the lounge

when the man in the Brandname suit called after him: "Hey there, kid! Slow down. Let's head for Abandoned Hope together."

Joe turned around and waited for his new acquaintance to catch up with him. He'd never seen anyone except a handicapped person who walked so strangely, lurching sideways with each slow, shuffling step forward.

"Sorry to be so slow," he said when he caught up with Joe. "It's these d'mn'd concrete shoes." He pulled up his pants legs to expose the blocks of concrete encasing his fect. "I'm a Teamster," he said, in a tone of authority. He didn't have to add, "And that explains everything." That idea was built into his voice.

"Is that so?" said Joe.

"And you?" the Teamster asked, lowering his trouser cuffs and lurching forward along the corridor, which was decorated with neon arrows pointing toward martini glasses.
"Me?"

"What organization are you representing today?"
"Um, the Wild, uh, F*ck*ng Animals."

The Teamster nodded and seemed to take no offense. Ioe felt relieved.

"Though I'm not sure," he went on, "that I'm a fullfledged member yet. I think there's still some test I have to pass, or something. At the tournament, or rally, or whatever it is. No one bothers to explain the rules here, until you've broken them;

"There's only one rule, kid. You want to know what it is? I'll tell you what it is. Look out for Number One." He offered his hand for Joe to shake. "The name's Enzo. Enzo di Vita."

"You know my name," said Joe woefully.

"Yeah, and you know what I think of it. Listen, kid, there's no *need* to adopt a defeatist attitude at your age. Tell me, have you been bonded yet?"

ell me, have you been bonded yet?" "No," said Joe.

"Then become a dork like me. No dork would ever call himself 'Loser.' I mean, sure, all right, maybe life f*cks you over sometimes. That can't be helped. But calling yourself 'Loser.' that's like a g*dd*nn invitation."

"You're probably right."

"Right. And I'll tell you how else I'm right. I'll bet you think dorks are all fat guys in business suits who spend all their time worrying about the mortgage payments on their houses in the suburbs. Am I right?"

He was right, that was just the way Joe thought of dorks, but he didn't think Enzo would have wanted him to say so. But before he could think of what else to say instead, Enzo continued. "You want to know what a dork really is, kid? I'll tell you what a dork really is. A dork is a mensch."

"What's a mensch?" asked Joe.

"What's a mensch!" Enzo shouted gleefully. "What's a mensch! If tell you what a mensch is someone who's going to go out on the playing field of life and kick 'ss in order to bring home the bacon. That's a mensch. You ever see elves kick 'ss' Frill, no. The most elves ever do is brown-nose. Elves! Do you know what elves are paid, the very best of them? Fifty thou an hour,

tops. And those are the elves working overtime at the North Pole."

"It's a lot more than I'm paid," said Joe. He didn't mean to complain, just to set the facts straight.

"So go be an elf. Join the Shoemakers. Join the Garment Workers. But don't come crying on my shoulder

when you find you've paid your pension to the mob."
"I didn't say I wanted to be an elf. Actually I've been thinking I'm more cut out to be a troll."

thinking I'm more cut out to be a troll."

"Trolls are all right, I guess," said Enzo grudgingly.

"In fact, some trolls are hard as tomatoes. But dorks pop more corks, as the saying goes. Speaking of which . . ." Enzo spread out his arms in a gesture so expansive it seemed not just to point to but to bring into being the neon sign over the entrance to the lounge:

ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE Another United Avatars Concession

"I don't know about you," said Enzo, "but I am dying for a drink." He chumped up to the bar, hoisted his right foot onto the brass rail, and ordered a zombie, which is a cocktail made with two kinds of rum and three kinds of fruit juices and, in keeping with the bar's theme, a little plastic pitchfork spearing a chunk of pineapple. Joe had the same.

Enzo held up his glass in a toast. "Success!" "Success," Ioe agreed.

At just that moment the screen above the bar burst into flames. The flames parted to reveal the dusky features and soulful eyes of the Divine Rebecca singing the one song in all the world best calculated to reduce Joe to jelly. She was his absolutely favorite lead female vocalist, and he'd voced for her albums on Election Day ever since he'd been old enough to vote. And "The Illiterate Blues" had to be the saddest song she'd ever sung. Every time the refrain came around it just blew Joe away:

My boat is sunk, my love lies drunk, My wages are all garnasheed. So fix us another, we'll drink to my mother. Oh, how I wish I could read!

"It's a sad song, all right," said Enzo when it was over, "but don't you think you're overdoing it?"

"It's the story of my life," Joe groaned, though even in the midst of the groan he realized that the idea, which had never occurred to him so clearly before now, that his life might form some kind of story was actually an idea to feel good about.

"Well," said Enzo philosophically, "we all drink too much sometimes. But you shouldn't take it so personally. Your boat hasn't sunk yet. Maybe it won't."

"Oh, that's not what gets to me. It's being illiterate. It's funny: I didn't use to care that much about it, but now it seems like I've wasted my whole life by not being able to read and write."

"Well, you might not win any f*ck*ng spelling bee, but you've got the basics. Don't you?" "It's true that I learned all twenty-five letters today, at least to look at. But what I don't know, except for three or four of them, is their names."

"Whose names?"
"The letters'. Like O. Or the one you told me, R."

"You mean you don't know the alphabet? G*d d*mn, what do they teach you kids in school these days?"

Joe hung his head shamefully.

"Well, h"ll, if it'll make you feel better, kid, I'll teach you your AIGS, just the way they were taught to me when I was a little nipper at St. Corleone's Convent School. And just so's you'll know which letters we're talking about, I'll spell them out in zombie juice. Like so." He tipped his glass and spilled some of his zombie onto the wood surface of the bar. Then with his speared pincapple chunk he drew an A in the spilled zombie and began to recite:

The Teamsters' Alphabet

A is an *sshole, and B is a Blonde. C is the Con-man by whom we are conned. D's the Deceased that we found in the pond.

E is for Emie, who was such a wimp. F is a F*ck-*p, and G is a Gimp. H is a H**k*r who works with a p*mp.

I's for Italian, and J is for Jail. K is a Killer, imprisoned and pale. L is two Lovers; M is the Male.

N is the Numbers, and O is your Odds On the P's, which are Ponies, so

pray to your gods You win Q, for Quinella, and score with some br**ds.

R is Religion, and I drink R.C.

S is for Suffer, and Tough starts with T. U is for Underworld. Vengeance is V.

W's Why, as in "Why are we here?" Because we were sentenced to Y, for a Year. Z is this Zombie; d'you rather have beer?

"I think I would, as a matter of fact," said Joe. "These 4 zombies are sort of sweet for steady drinking. Anyhow, if we're going to be contestants, maybe we shouldn't be having any more to drink anyhow."
"You didn't hear a f'ek'ng thing I told you," Enzo

"You didn't hear a f*ck*ng thing I told you," Enzo complained.

"No, honestly, I listened real close." To prove it he recited the whole poem back to Enzo, splashing the last of his zombie on the bar to draw the letters in. He messed up from N through Q, where it got complicated, but on the whole it was an impressive performance.

"I'm impressed," said Enzo. "So why suddenly today are you learning all this, when you didn't learn nothing all those years sitting on your *ss in school?"

"I guess I must be motivated now. At school my counselor always said I lacked motivation."

"So now you've got some motivation, maybe you'll go out and get yourself some decent clothes. You look like sh't."

"Actually," said Joe, "I look a bit better than Sh*t, but not a whole lot, I'll admit."

Enzo guffawed and slapped Joe on the back. "Kid," he predicted, "you've got a career in show business, if you only knew it."

Suddenly the trumpets started trumpeting, and the screen above the bar turned brighter and expanded to its full size.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" an announcer boomed. "We take you now to the Surewould Forest Dorkery in romantic Surewould Forest for America's best-loved battle to the d**th, the Tournament of Poses!"

The scene on the screen was singularly romantic. On the verge of a wood was an extensive meadow of the finest and most beautiful green Astroturf, surrounded on one side by the forest and fringed on the other by strangler oak-trees, some of which had grown to immense size. The ground, as if fashioned on purpose for the martial display which was intended, sloped gradually down on all sides to a level bottom, which was enclosed for the tournament with barbed-wire fencing, forming a space a quarter of a mile in length, and about half as broad. The openings for the entry of the contestants were at the northern and southern extremities of the field, accessible by strong wooden gates, each wide enough to admit two horsemen riding a breast.

"Well, kid, I guess that's me."

"What?" said Joe. Something strange was happening inside his head. Enzo and the rest of the customers in the Abandoned Hope Lounge seemed hazy and out of focus, and only the screen's image of the multitudes assembled on the Astrourt slopes of the Dorkery was clear.

"They're calling my number," said Enzo. His voice sounded strange and bubbly, as though he were talking underwater. "But I'll tell you what I'm going to do."

"What?" asked Ioe.

"I'll see to it that you go out on that field looking like a mensch. I'm going to buy you a Brandname suit."

"What? I mean, why?"

"Why?" Enzo grinned and threw his arm around Joe's shoulders and gave him a comradely squeeze. "Because I like you, that's why."

"But there isn't time and anyhow a Brandname suit must cost—"

"Cost! Since when does Enzo di Vita think about cost? Besides, who knows what Fate has in store? I may be at the end of my line of credit. I don't say that's likely, but it's possible—so what the h'fl."

"Gee, Mr. di Vita, that would be swell. I don't know how to thank you."

"By looking like a mensch when I see you at the Victory Celebration tonight, that's how. 'Cause I'm counting on you to be a winner."

"I promise I'll do my best, sir."

"I know you will, kid."

"Mr. di Vita, we're waiting," said one of the Dorkery's marshals, who stood by the door of the bar.

"I'll see you at the Victory Celebration, kid! Come h*ll or high water. And *that's* a promise, too!"

Joe and Enzo shook hands, and then Enzo and three

Joe and EIZO SHOOK BANDS, and then EIZO and three other Teamsters followed the Dorkery marshal out of the Abandoned Hope Lounge, all lumbering along in their concrete shoes like a parade of Frankenstein monsters in double-breasted suits.

As soon as they were gone, Joe felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to confront a plump, rosy-cheeked fairy with two tape measures draped around his neck, one for inches and one for centimeters.

"Mr. Boser," the fairy greeted him with a little bow. "I am Hyman Buber. If you'll come with me to the changing room downstairs, we can start your fitting."

Chapter Thirteen

Dressing for Success

While Hyman Buber measured Joe's waist and his inseam and the distance from his elbow to the back of his hand, first in inches and then in centimeters, Joe watched the beginning of the Tournament of Poses on the changing room's closed-circuit tv.

First there was a kind of parade, as the contestants entered from opposite ends of the field, riding on two large pink breasts. The breasts looked very soft and bouncy, though they must have been substantial enough, since the four contestants, in addition to their own weight, were all wearing concrete shoes. While the breasts circled the outer elliptical gravel track of the Dorkery and the contestants waved to the crowd, a corps of precision batton twiders marched out to the middle of the field, where—all the while keeping the battons whirling or flying about through the air—they rolled back the strips of Astroutf that covered the James Hoffa Memorial Swimming Pool.

The breasts rolled to a stop beside the pool. The crowd hushed.

"Do you dress to the right, sir, or to the left?" Hyman Buber asked Joe.

"How's that?" said Joe.

"This," said the tailor delicately. "Here, or here?" "Oh," said Joe. "Here."

There was a flourish of trumpets, and through the wooden gate at the north end of the field, towed by a team of horses, a fifty-foot-high skeletal pyramid formed of aluminum tubing was trundled onto the field. At the top of this pyramidal jungle gym, on a constantly revolving platform, was a long springy diving board. The pyramid was positioned directly over the James Hoffa Memorial Swimming Pool.

The band began to play Rossini's ever-popular William Tell Overture. The Teamster dorks took this as their cue to dismount from the giant breasts. Walking across a resilient surface with one's feet encased in blocks of concrete wasn't easy, and the dorks' efforts sent ripples of laughter through the large audience gathered on the slopes.

"Sir . . . ?"

Joe looked away from the scene with a smile of mild embarrassment. It didn't seem right for a fairy so many years older than Joe to be calling him sir.

"As to the material for your suit . . . ?"

"Oh, I don't know anything about that. Why not whatever Enzo's suit was made of, since this was all his idea. Do you think he'll win? What are the rules? I've never been here before and—"

"His suit would appear to be wool flannel," said the tailor, squinting at the screen and paying not the slightest attention to Joe's nervous chatter. "Which, for a gentleman of a certain age and whose proportions would have to be called pordy is a reasonable choice. But much too conservative for a lad with your physical advantages. Surely this is an ideal opportunity to aim for drama, fashion, flair, a little glitz. But of course that's up to you."

"Glitz is fine, I guess, if it doesn't cost too much. I don't want Enzo to wish he hadn't been so generous when he sees the bill."

The tailor sighed and began punching data into the console of his loom. "As to that, I'm afraid Mr. di Vita will probably never find out the measurements of his generosity. Now don't fuss me any more with questions. You'll be on next, so we don't have all day. While I program your suit—and I think a linen-spandees blend would be quite dashing, don't you?—I want you to take off those rags you're wearing and put your head under the fluffer and fluff it. You're covered with mud;

Meanwhile on the tv the camera had cut to close-ups of the smiling faces of the Tournament's two anchormen, the Smiler brothers, who addressed the audience, one in an ordinary typeface, the other in italics, as follows:

"Hello, I'm Ernest."

"And I'm Frank."

"We're here for Surewould Savings Bank
To bring you—"

"—if there is no rain—"

"Instructive spectacles of pain For those who fail."

"And for the few

> Who taste success, an interview With NBC's own Sean O'Shea

And dinner at the Parking Lot Cafe!"
"And now, for Surewould Savings Bank,
Here's what we call . . ."

"... Walking the Plank!"

The chief baton twirler blew her whistle and the four dorks, who had taken up positions on the four sides of the pyramid, began to climb the greased tubing as fast as the weight of their shoes allowed them. High above them the diving board revolved at a varying rpm, sometimes so fast that no one could have got on it, sometimes quite lazily.

As the dorks mounted higher and the pyramid nar-

rowed, they began to take an oblique course upward, angling for a position of advantage from which they could, as the chant of the crowd urged them, kick *ss. A wish more easily chanted than granted, for if one misjudged the force of once kick, or if one missed one's target, the momentum of the concrete shoe could carry kicker instead of kickee into the pool. That, indeed, was the fate of the Teamster who tried to eliminate Enzo. As he swung his concrete-shod foot at him, Enzo twisted sideways. His opponent, unable to keep his grip on the greased tubing, plunged screaming into the James Hoffa Memorial Swimming Pool. For the minute or so that it took him to drown, you could see his hands waving around above the surface of the water.

Joe realized that this was a good example of what people meant when they complained about sports having become too brutal and sensational, since if they had made the James Holfa Memorial Swimming Pool only slightly deeper you would never have been able to see the hands of the drowning Teamsters twitching and trembling and finally going limp. On the other hand, there are people who wouldn't attend sporting events at all if it weren't for the chance to enjoy such details, so where do you draw the line? Live and let live was probably still the wisest philosophy.

With the first direct hit, the pyramid began slowly to telescope in on itself. The contest was now a race against time as well as a free-for-all, since if it got down below a certain height the diving board would not provide enough snap for the diver diving from it to reach the Astrouth Devond the edge of the pool.

The next hit was provided by Enzo, a bone-shattering kick to the pelvis of one of his rivals. The disabled dork did not at once fall into the pool, and Enzo was obliged to climb two rungs higher and stomp on the dork's fingers, while the crowd roared with excitement or cursed their luck in having placed their bets on the wrong dork. There was a fleeting close-up of the Wild F'ck'ng Animals in the midst of the crowd, looking for the time being just like ordinary people as they screamed the scream of the hour. Kick 'ss Kick' ss' Sik Kick 'ss' Sik Kick 'ss'

Enzo's last remaining rival had not wasted any time while Enzo was kicking *ss. He mounted the pyramid so fast that the tubing began to buckle beneath the impact of his concrete footsteps. More by luck than good timing, he reached the apex just as the mesh-enclosed (entrance to the board swung around in front of him. He got on nimbly enough-but then froze. The pyramid had only retracted by some fifteen or sixteen of its fifty feet. A dive from this height in concrete shoes, while it might clear the side of the pool, was likely to be crippling. Twenty-five feet is the height most authorities on this sport recommend for a leap, but before the apex of the pyramid was down to that optimum level, the board would have made three, possibly even four, revolutions, and with each revolution Enzo di Vita would have an opportunity to enter the board and continue kicking *ss.

"Oh, dear," said the tailor, "you haven't done a thing with your hair. And now there isn't time. Well, at least

you'll look presentable from the collar down when you make your entrance."

"What?" said Joe, paying no more heed to Hyman Bubers talk than the tailor did himself. Talk, for some people, is not so much a means of communicating as a more complicated form of breathing. Which doesn't mean such people are silly or stupid, only that there's no obligation for us to listen to them.

"Never mind. Just hold your arm up, so. Now bend it back. A little more. Ah, a perfect fit. Now the other arm."

While Hyman Buber busied himself first undressing and then dressing Joe like a store-window mannikin, the dork on the diving board tried to make up his mind whether to stand right in front of the entrance to the board and trade kick for kick with Enzo when and if he tried to get on-or whether, instead, to take his chances on a leap from this height. He went to just beyond the middle of the board, dipped his knees to feel the flex of the board-and got cold feet. As the board revolved around, slowly, inexorably, to where Enzo was waiting behind the steel mesh, he shuffled back to the base of the board to keep Enzo from getting on. He drew back his leg, ready to kick. The entrance winked open, like the cap of a pepper can when you twist it to full throttle, and then winked shut. Enzo, smug with the satisfaction of his first hit and biding his time, just grinned as he let his first chance go by.

"Lift your right leg, please," said the tailor. "A little higher. Fine. Now the left. Lovely, lovely. Now for your hair, we'll just tuck it into this fine top hat of yours, add some bunting, and voila! He's really doing quite well,

isn't he?"

"What? Who? Enzo, you mean. He's doing terrific."

"Too bad he doesn't stand a chance."

"Why not? If he can knock the other dork off the

board—"
"Ah, but when two of them reach the board . . ." The tailor shook his head forebodingly. "At least that's what the record books show. Still. from an audience point of

view this is surely more thrilling. Now take a deep breath
—and hold it."

Enzo's rival had returned to the middle of the diving board and seemed to be about to leap. He bounced up and down tentatively—once, twice. The board began to revolve more quickly, and the dork almost lost his balance, which gave Enzo the opportunity he was waiting for to get through the entrance, as it winked open, and out onto the board.

His rival made one last desperate attempt to kick *ss, but with Enzo stomping on the board and the board spinning around at a higher rpm, he didn't stand a chance. As he lifted his foot for a kick, Enzo smashed his concrete shoe into the middle of the board, and his luckless rival was catapulted up into the empty air and down to a watery death.

Enzo, thinking himself victorious, strode to the end of the diving board—but strode too far and strode too vigorously. Weakened by the previous contest, the carefully prepared wood snapped under the combined weight of the concrete shoes and the force of Enzo's preliminary spring. Knowing himself doomed, Enzo tried to exit with grace, but Fate denied him even that satisfaction. What he'd intended as a swan dive hit the water as a belly-whopper, and Enzo died with the crowd's laughter reverberatine dully in the water about him.

A terrible end—and one that we would all do well to contemplate, especially those of us inclined to think that kicking 'ss and clawing one's way up the ladder of success with no consideration for the feelings or fingers of other people are valid solutions to the problems of life.

But there's no time for such sober reflections now. Already Hyman Buber had led Joe from the tv to the big three-way mirror on the other side of the changing room.

"Well?" Hyman prompted with craftsman's pride.

"What do you think?"

Joe looked at himself in each of the three mirrors, then turned halfway around and looked over his shoulder. He couldn't believe how incredibly spiffy he looked in the mirrors, like a model on the cover of a magazine —Fairy Glamor, it might be, or Yankee Doodle Dorks.

"Terrific," said Joe. "Just terrific."

"I think that white can never fail on a solemn occasion," said the tailor, tugging at the hem of his jacket to straighten an imaginary wrinkle. "There's a saying in the trade: White and tight delight us quite." While the bunting on your hat adds just that little dash of color that says 'Holkday.' Oh, not to forget: this was in the pocket of that old jacket, which I have taken the liberty to put in the trash converter." He handed Joe Loser's credit card. "And here"—he pinned the big black-and-white "Born to Lose" button to the flaring lapel of the suit jacket—is your coat-of-arms, so to speak. And now you're ready for combat. I should say. "Yes?"

"I guess so," said Joe.

"Yes," said Hyman Buber decisively. He pushed a button beside the three-way mirror, which, with a low mechanical rumble, retracted into the floor. Simultaneously
the low platform Joe had been standing on rose to a
great height, passing through the luminous ceiling of the
changing room into the still more luminous light of day.
There was a treat roar of approval from the spectators

as Joe, resplendent in his tight, white, linen-spandees Brandname suit, appeared, as if by magic, in the middle of the Surewould Forest Dorkery.

Chapter Fourteen

The Combat Between Lust and Chastity

"Ladies and gentlemen! Dorks and fairies!"

"Elves, trolls, liberals, and reactionaries!"

"The management of Surewould Forest Dorkery is proud to present—"

"—wearing a white Brandname linen-spandecs suit with shoulders and pecs molded in ultra-lifelike Ripple-Tecs—"

"—and riding—"
"—if he reaches it—"

"-a triple-extended, scallop-bottomed, 2500cc parachromed Harley-Davidson Blue Chip Chopper.'

"Our first unbonded contestant of the day-" "-with the dew still wet behind his ears!"

"He's not a dork and not a fairy-"

"-nor yet an elf or troll."

"Ladies and gentlemen, will you welcome . . ." The two announcers finished the intro together: "Joe! Doe!"

While the crowd applauded him again. Joe had time to wonder why the anchormen had used his real name and not the name he'd written on the WR-17 form. He figured that the lady elf in the polka-dot uniform must not have believed him when he'd told her he'd filled in the first card with the wrong name and that she'd turned in that card instead of the one that said "Loser Boser." In a way it was just as well, since now, in his spiffy Brandname suit, he'd just as soon take credit for what he accomplished in the contest ahead, assuming there would be credit to take. He hoped the anchormen would explain what they expected of him.

"May we now direct your attention to the other end of the field, where in a simple white Qiana shift in the style of ancient Greece-"

"-with a diadem upon her brow, shaped like the crescent moon-

"-from Crescent Moon Diadems of West Forty-Seventh Street-"

"-and armed with a 60-bound-draw, bulleyactivated compound bow from Warner Communica-

"-and three Robin Hood Flower brand arrows, with patented Trac III arrowheads from Gillette, United Avatars is proud to bring you-"

"-the redoubtable--"

"the merciless!---"

"-the very lovely: Artemesia Albatross!"

At the end of the Dorkerv field farthest from Ioe a pedestal sprang up from the ground to a height of some twelve feet. Standing on the pedestal, just as she had been described, was a woman with the instant impact of one of your favorite golden oldies coming at you over your headphones when you're least suspecting it and most susceptible. In a word, Zing!

"Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Albatross, as a woman of courage, honor and gentility-"

"-and a virgin of unsullied reputation-"

"-does maintain and depose that this contestant, Joe Doe, in his own person and as a member of the organization he here represents-'

"-to wit, the Wild F*ck*ng Animals-"

At this mention of their name, the Wild F*ck*ng Animals and their Old Ladies' Auxiliary could be heard to strike up the drinking song recorded earlier in these pages. Their high spirits were opposed by others about them in the audience, and only the quick response of the Dorkery's marshals prevented this altercation from becoming more widespread

"To resume," Ernest Smiler continued sternly, "Miss Albatross proposes to defend her honor and the honor of her sex against all those who by word or lifestyle would deny to Chastity a merited courtesy and esteem.'

"Whereas," Frank Smiler went on, "Mr. Doe, as champion of the Wild F*ck*ng Animals, maintains that Lust and Lust alone guides Man in his relation to Woman who desires. Mr. Doe avers, just one thing, and that is to be found between a man's legs!"

At this there were both cheers and groans from the audience. Joe felt that words were being put into his mouth, and he wondered if the same were true for Artemesia Albatross up there on her pedestal.

"Are the contestants ready? Miss Albatross?"

Artemesia Albatross held her bow high above her head to signify that she was ready. "Mr. Doe?"

"Before I answer that, could you tell me what I am supposed to do?" Joe called, with no real hope of being heard, since he could see no microphones about him. His question was answered not by either of the an-

chormen but by a voice on the headphones in his head, the same voice that had welcomed him to Surewould Forest and spoken to him out of the void. "You're supposed to start up your motorcycle and drive it across the yellow line just in front of the pedestal the lady is standing on. Then go take the brass ring and bring-" "What brass ring?"

"The one on the hook at the base of the pedestal, dum-dum. Then you take the ring to the judges' stand, and they declare you the winner. Any more questions?" "IIm-"

"Mr. Doe, are you ready?"

Joe raised his stovepipe hat and semaphored toward the judges' stand. What he would have to do, he told himself, was after the contest explain to Miss Albatross -what a beautiful name it was, Albatross-that his views on the subject of sex were not so extreme or alarming as Frank Smiler had made out. Meanwhile, however, he was a contestant, and the contest had begun, and people were counting on him to compete. So, crossing his fingers for luck, Joe strode across the glowing Astroturf toward his motorcycle, while the band struck up a version, scored for woodwinds and brass, of Schönberg's beautiful Transfigured Night.

He'd nearly reached the Harley, which was parked some fifty yards from the pedestal, when Artemesia lifted her bow, took careful aim, and shot the first of her Trac III arrows-Wbffft/-right into the bike's naugahyde water-saddle. If the arrow had passed just inches to the right it would have gone into Joe's neck instead of the

"Hey, watch it!" Joe yelled. He knew that his rival didn't bear any ill will toward him personally, but that didn't stop him from feeling unfairly dealt with. No one likes to be treated as a target, even by someone he would otherwise admire. The one silver lining in the situation was that she didn't seem to be an expert marksman, though she was no slouch either. It didn't take any more advice from his headphones to figure out that the thing to do was get that ring off its hook and over to the judges' stand pronto.

Joe mounted the Chopper and, disregarding the warm water spurting into the small of his back from the punctured water-saddle, he kicked the big red knob down by his right foot and twisted the rubber grip at the end of the handlebars. The Chopper went *Thrup' Thrup' Blug!* and died.

He kicked harder and twisted with a tighter grip. The Chopper went Blug, blug, fivoo. . . .

"Oh-oh," said Ernest Smiler. "It looks as if Joe is having a little trouble getting his show on the road. What would you do in his shoes, Frank?"

"If I were bim—and right at this moment, folks, I'm glad I'm anyone else—but if I were bim, I think I'd let that engine rest for a while. Sounds to me like the batteries are tired."

"Right you are, Frank—and it makes me think if that Harley had been equipped with General Energy's new Powerhouse Batteries—"

"—Joe would not be in his present pickle. There's no doubt about that, Ernest. This sure is the wrong time to have the wrong batteries. Because, if you will direct your attention to 'Missy' Albatross—"

"I see her, Frank. I wonder if Joe does."

A second arrow flew from Artemesia's bow and knocked off Joe's stovepipe hat.

"That was close," remarked Ernest knowledgeably.
"But not quite close enough. Miss Albatross wasn't

able to maintain the holding weight. Either that bow's too big for her—"
"—Or she's too small for the bow, said Ernest, with a

chuckle. "Seriously, Frank, if she can't handle that bow, she's got reason to worry. Because if her third arrow misses—"

"—and if Joe can get to that brass ring—"
"—then as a forfeit her pedestal will be lowered to ground level and she will be—"

But Ernest did not get to explain the precise nature of her possible forfeit, because Joe, having sat there like a sitting duck as long as he could bear to, kicked the red knob by his right foot with all his night, and this time the Chopper roared into life. The magnificent motorcycle reared up on its 38-inch back wheel and then plunged forward straight at the pedestal on which Aremesia, looking as cool as a marble statue in a snowy park, took aim with the last of her arrows.

Swift as an arrow and straight to the point, the deadly fiberglass missile flew to its goal. With a sharp little *ding* it struck Joe in his heart and he was hurled, senseless, from the saddle of the roaring Harley.

Chapter Fifteen

The Queen of Love and Beauty

Senseless, yes, but not dead it turned out, and soon enough conscious again. For even while big red bloops blossomed rhythmically beneath his eyelids, Joe could hear the excited anchormen booming out over the roar of the crowd:

"Folks, it looks like the lady in white has done it again. For the third Tournament of Poses in a row, Artemesia Albatross has defeated her challenger with a bull's-eye smack-dab into the little guy's heart."

"Sure enough, Ernest, there's no denying that Missy: 'as a brilliant markswoman. And a lucky thing for ber that she is, for we all know what would have been ber fale if— But wait a minute! I'm not sure this contest is over yet. Did I see— Yes! Don't throw away your betting stubs, folks. Mr. Doe is down, but he is definitely not out."

Joe had pushed himself up to a sitting position as Frank Smiler went on explaining to the audience that what they were seeing was exciting and totally unexpected. Gingerly, Joe touched the shaft of the arrow that still projected from his chest and felt a twinge of pain where the tip of the Trac III arrowhead had pierced his flesh. But only a twinge: Thanks to the combination of the "Born to Lose" button and the suit's patented Ripple-Tees pees, the arrow had not sunk in deep enough to do real harm.

"It's a miracle, Frank," said Ernest. "A miracle that defies reason and logic, but there it is before our eyes— Joe Doe is still alive!"

Shakily but, as the anchorman insisted, still alive, Joe got to his feet and felt a brief, unbearably delightful shiver of pleasure blast through his body and fade into the sky. Buoyed up by that thunderbolt from his body's chemistry, Joe gritted his tecth, closed his tyes, took a firm grip on the shaft of the arrow, counted to three, and yanked the Trac III arrowhead out of flesh, kipple-Tecs, and button all in a single, decisive, agonizing extraction. Out and the pain with it. Inside his suit, under the Ripple-Tecs lining, he could feel warm blood trickling down his chest like water dribbling from a faucet you can't close all the way.

But that scarcely registered on Joc's consciousness. What did register, what fairly knocked him back on the Astroturf again, was the way the arrow had changed the message on the button and with it the whole meaning of his life. For now instead of reading "Born to Lose," his button read "Born to Love." Just one letter different, a V cut into the metal where the S had been, but what a difference that one letter made!

Because it was true, he knew it now—he was born to love, and there on the pedestal before him, in her white Qiana shift, with the diadem on her brow, was the object of his undying love, Artemesia Albatross, the most beautiful woman in the world, the queen of love and beauty.

You might think that having just been hit in the chest by one of her arrows and almost killed, Joe would feel hostile toward Artemesia, or shy, or would harbor any of a number of other feelings than love, but when love hits you, there is no doubting what it is, and there is usually no explaining it either. Though as to Artemesia's having nearly killed him, that is not really a contradiction, since it's often the way of it that the people we fight with the hardest are also the people we learn to love the most. You might object that Joe had learned to love his challenger in the combat of love very fast indeed, but then we've seen that he's a fast learner generally, and there is such a thing, after all, as love at first sight, which was exactly what was taking place inside Joe. And while it did, he just stood there, holding the arrow Artemesia had shot at him and gazing at her in amazement that anyone could be so beautiful.

She was like a rose.

She was like a red, red rose. For roses, you know, have a way of being so weirdly and intensely red it's as though they exist in another dimension, as though they meant by sheer force of their crimson beauty to expand your range of vision and make you able to see all the heat and juice and secret joy of the infrared wavelengths of light, Just so, when you're in love you see things and understand things that otherwise you would have been completely blind to.

But it isn't just because roses are red that they're so wonderful. They're also damnably hard to grow, since they don't come about naturally, except the simplest of them, which we're not discussing here. We're discussing the Floribunda glorioskis, the Aurora Dreamboats, the American Beauties that exist only in gardens where someone is forever fussing with mulches and powders and pruning the bushes and doing all those tiresome chores that gardeners have to do to get their darlings into flower shows. Which is to say that grown-ups who are beautiful in the extravagant, complicated, flawless way that roses are are likewise the result of someone. usually their parents, seeing to it that they've got the right soil and just the proper amount of sunlight, etc. And it shows. Or, as the old horticultural adage has it, Breeding will out

And then, beyond color and fuss, there's the promise every flower makes, which is to say the promise of babies who'll grow up and be just as beautiful, for a little while, as the rose that's nodding here in the summer breeze, so red there's no word to express it, and with such an abundance of petals, and all so soft, and there lighting among the petals is a bee. And look, the bee is burrowing down into the soft petals, and who would ever have supposed that that was just what the rose had wanted and the very reason it was so red!

Well, that's love, or as much of love as can register at first sight. The rest must come with practice. That's not to say that it registers those meanings in so many words, for if you had told Joe that his love was like a red, red rose, he'd have probably given you a blank look, until he'd had some time to think about it, and then he'd have agreed, with the important reservation that the love he was feeling was totally different from the love that you or 1 or anyone just talks about.

"The suspense is killing me," said Ernest Smiler.

"And if that's what it's doing to you," said Frank, think what it's doing to Miss Albatross. Could we bave a close-up, please, for the benefit of the tv audience? Ab, just as I thought, she's falling to pieces. She who was so proud a moment ago is wringing her bands, gnawing at her lower lip, fighting back her tears."

"Tears, Frank? Terror would be more like it. Because

as soon as Joe takes the ring from where it's hanging and presents it to the judges, that pedestal is going to be low-ered to the ground, and three professional rapists from the Innacity Department of Correction will ravish that proud young lady before thousands of horrified viewers.

"Well, like they say, Ernest, pride goeth before a fall. Artemesia Albatross shot down two earlier challengers, but now it seems that 'Missy' has met her match—or soon will!"

"joe still seems a little groggy, folks, so while he gets his act together, let's fill the viewers in on the background of today's team of rapists. Herman Herpes' Honker has an unusual background for a corrections officer in that Herman . . . "

But Joe wasn't paying attention to Herman Honker's unusual background. He was trying to think of a way to save the woman he loved from being raped by a professional rapist. And he couldn't. Think, that is. Every time he tried to, a big hot ball of anger would explode inside his belly like an oven that fills up with gas before you can get a match lit and then Blooey' it ignites and sets your hair on fire.

Up to now Joe had never given much thought to the issue of capital punishment, whether in the form of murder or of rape. As I've explained, Joe didn't have much use for the evening news or for serious talk-shows, and of course, being illiterate, he hadn't read any of the arguments pro or con in newspapers and magazines. If something didn't have a direct connection to his own life, Joe just wasn't interested, and till now none of his personal acquaintances had ever been threatened with capital punishment, except for Pizza Bill, who had been raped in prison, but that was a long time ago and he never discussed it. But now that Joe did know someone in that situation, and loved her besides, it didn't seem right that she should be raped, not anyhow for something like losing a contest, which was not so much wrong as unlucky. Of course, as someone with regular access to the ongoing debate in the media might have pointed out to Ioe, bad luck is a basic aspect of human existence. whether it takes the form of being hit by a car or raped by a rapist. The important thing to bear in mind was that cars and rapists both perform significant social functions, functions for which there are no easily imaginable alternatives. Sometimes, as we have all experienced, a bus just can't get us where we need to go.

Joe, of course, was not mulling over these familiar arguments. He was feeling angry and anxious and not immediately able to cope. Then little by little he got his head in control of his feelings, and while the audience made catcalls and jeered and hooted, and the anchormen tried with no success to second-guess what he was up to, Joe set about rescuing Artemesia from Herman "Herpes" Honker and his two assistants, whose names were Boris and Cecelia.

First he went to the base of the pedestal and called up to her, which had to be done pretty much at the top of his lungs, due to the general uproar. "Hello! Artemesia! Can you hear me?"

She nodded in what seemed to Joe a sort of gloomy way.

"I love you!" he shouted, cupping his hands to his mouth. Then he blushed, since that wasn't what he'd meant to say; it had just slipped out. Though now that it had, he was glad, since it was something he'd have had to let her know sooner or later anyhow.

"Listen," he continued, "I've got an idea how to save you. What if we both took the ring to the judges? There's no rule against that, is there? Then we'd both be declared winners, and you wouldn't have to be raped. Doesn't that sound like a good idea?"

"Except for one thing," said Artemesia.

Hearing her voice for the first time, Joe got all shivery and his love suddenly doubled, like a stock that splits two for one without any warning and overnight you find that you're a millionaire.

She waited for him to ask her what that one thing was, but when he just gawked up at her with a silly grin she explained without more prompting: "I am chained to this pedestal." She lifted the hem of her white Qiana shift to show him the manacle around her right ankle, which was secured by a Jaree padlock.

Joe considered this new complication with due concern but no real perplexity, since in a pinch he felt sure he could pick just about any lock there was. But maybe he wouldn't have to.

"Wait half a minute," he called up to her, then dashed across the field to where his hat, with her arrow in it, lay on the Astroturf. There inside the hat, sure enough, was the large iron key on the long chain that Alecto had given to Coughdrop and Coughdrop had traded to him for his Smokes, and which he, when it hadn't fit the lock of his cage, had squirreled away in his hat, since you never can tell when something like a key may come in handy.

"Here," he said, returning to the pedestal and tossing the key up to Artemesia. "See if that works."

And what do you know—it did! A moment later the manacle was off Artemesis's ankle and she'd jumped down into Joe's arms. Then, to the amazement of the two anchormen and the entire audience assembled on the slopes of the Dorkery, Joe and Artemesia went together to the hook where the brass ring was hanging and took it very carefully, each of them, between thumb and forefinger, and then on tiptoe in perfect unison, as though they were carrying a teeny-tiny basket of eggs, they brought it to the judges' stand and held it up for the judges to accept.

Nothing like this had ever happened before at the Dorkery, and the judges, who were sticklers for precedent, didn't know what to do. They whispered among themselves and threw nervous glances out toward the crowd, but you couldn't tell what the more popular verdict would be, since some people were cheering while others, who'd been looking forward to the rape, were being obstreperous in the other direction. In fact, there were fights breaking out all over the Dorkery, and it was doubtful whether there'd be enough marshals to stop a full-scale irof from developing, Something had to be done, and quickly, so the quickest of the judges held up his scales and cleared his throat and declared that both Joe Doe and Artemesia were the victors of their combat, and so both would be interviewed at the Victory Celebration by NBCs Scan O'Shea. However, as to the voucher for dinner at the Parking Lot Cafe, the judge declared that as there was only one such voucher, they would either have to share it or flip to see which of them would use it.

"We won!" said Joe, beaming. "Didn't I say we'd win? We won!"

Artemesia just smiled, but it was such a smile that if Joe's life had stopped then and there—which, of course, was not about to happen—it would have been enough: the memory of that smile would have lasted out Eternity.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked her, and when she didn't say no, he assumed she meant yes and kissed her.

It was one of those kisses that go on and on without ever getting either ever rough or ever mustly. More as though while they were kissing someone had pulled out the cord of the clock and the second hand of Tine itself had stopped going around for a length of time that could therefore not be measured.

When they stopped kissing they both sort of sighed

and took a siep backward from each other. Then, in perfect unison, as though they'd been rehearsing for weeks, they fainted dead away. Joe had fainted simply from the loss of so much blood, but Artemesia may have fainted for any number of reasons. Possibly from theife, or possibly from the excitement of the kiss, or possibly because she'd seen the bright red stain in the crotch of Joe's Brandname suit, where the blood from his wound had found its way through the Ripple-Tees lining. But not, I think, because she'd seen the symmetrical sain on her own shift, where Joe's blood had printed itself on the white Olana, like ink from a press, while they were kissing.

It was such a dramatic spectacle, the two of them lying there in a swoon with their matching bloodstains,
each in the form, roughly, of the letter A, that the audience forgot all about their earlier altercations and just
settled down and enjoyed the show. Soon enough the
anchornen were announcing the next contest, which
was to be a free-for-all spelling bec that only one of the
twelve competing elves—all dressed as daffodils or files
—would survive. As the floral elves entered the Dorkery
to the affecting strains of the Pilgrim's March from Tambauser, a team of paramedicals whisked the bodies of
loe and Artemsai from the field of combat.

And now, if you would like to go eat something, or go to the toilet, or take a breather for whatever other reason, this would be a good moment to do so, since the hero and heroine are unconscious and will need some time to recuperate after the ordeal they've been through.

To be continued



If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING® Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1960s and 1970s, plus every magazine from May 1990 through September 1992, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days. Also available is another anthology, Cinemonsters, which is described in detail on the following page.

All of the anthologies and most of the magazines are in mint condition. Among the copies of any single back issue, the magazines in mint condition are sold first. Every publication has a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with what you get, send back the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the return postage.

Prices of the digest-sized magazines vary according to age, with the older issues costing less than the newer ones (because the cover price of the older magazines was lower).

After you've totaled the prices for the old magazines vou want, add on a postage charge of \$1.00 for the first issue and 50¢ for each additional issue through the tenth one. If you order more than ten digest-sized magazines, you don't pay any additional postage charge.

The new-format, full-sized issues, beginning with May 1991, are priced at a flat rate of \$5.00 each, which includes postage. (Prices for the anthologies also have postage costs built in.)

To make an order, write out clearly and legibly the magazines you want, calculate the total cost, and enclose a check or money order for that amount. Send your order to the magazine's business office (P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147). All orders will be shipped via thirdclass mail or UPS within two days of receipt.

If we can't fill your order because of soldout issues, we'll reserve for you the issues we can sell you; then we'll send back your check or money order and ask you to send us exact payment for the items we can provide for you.

As an option, you can ask to receive one or more of the anthologies as a replacement for back issues that might be sold out. If you like this idea, just tell us the anthologies you'd like to have, in order of preference, and we'll make sure that you get your money's worth.

DIGEST-SIZED MAGAZINES - \$1.25 each -

2 copies April 1968

(Cover says June) Send Her Victorious by Brian Aldiss: The Mechanical Heart by H. I. Barrett: Stenographer's Hands by David H. Keller

House A-Fire by Samuel R. Delany; Locked Worlds by Edmond Hamilton; This Is My Son by Paul W. Fairman; The Impossible Weapon by Milton Lesser

September 1972 20 copies

Fat City by Ross Rocklynne; Deflation 2001 by Bob Shaw; Proof by F. M. Busby: Jupiter Project (first of two parts) by Gregory Benford

January 1973 34 copies The Ascending Aye by Gordon Eklund: Night Shift by George R. R.

Martin: On Ice by Barry N. Malzberg: Close Your Eyes and Stare at Your Memories by A. G. Moran

August 1973 47 copies

To Walk With Thunder by Dean McLaughlin; The Once and Always War by Gerard F. Conway; Up Against the Wall by Robert Thurston; They Roar by Clark Cox

- \$1.50 each -

November 1978 15 copies

While the North Wind Blous by Christopher Anvil; Green Thumb by Marion Zimmer Bradley: Last Rocket from Newark by Jack C. Haldeman II

- \$1.75 each -

May 1990

Giant, Giant Steps by Robert Frazier, Computer Portrait by Javge Carr. Fatal Disk Error by George Alec Effinger

July 1990

Harvest by Kristine Kathryn Rusch: The Secret of Life by David Brin: Sequoia Dreams by Sheila Finch

September 1990 Harlem Nova by Paul Di Filippo; At Vega's Taqueria by Richard A. Lupoff; Wboso List to Hunt by Susan Shwartz

November 1990

When the Ship Comes In by R. Garcia y Robertson; Command Performance by Kathe Koja; Bebind the Eyes of Dreamers by Pamela Sargent

Stranger Suns (Part One) by George Zebrowski; A Painting Lesson by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; Life in a Drop of Pond Water by Bruce Bethke

March 1991

Dog's Life by Martha Soukup; The Dragon of Aller by John Brunner; Stranger Suns (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

FULL-SIZED MAGAZINES - \$5.00 each (includes postage) -

May 1991

A Tip on a Turtle by Robert Silverberg; Change of Face by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; The Ghost Taker by Lawrence Watt-Evans; Klepsit by John Brunner

Victoria by Paul Di Filippo; Hitmen-See Murderers by Timothy Zahn; The Sixty-Five Million Year Sleep by Sharon N. Farber; the button, and what you know by W. Gregory Stewart

July 1991

Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life by John Morressy: Arms and the Woman by James Morrow: The Perfect Hero by Elizabeth Moon; Holos at an Exhibition by Bruce Boston and Robert Frazier

August 1991

Fantasies by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; The Number of the Sand by George Zebrowski; The Face of the Waters by Robert Silverberg

September 1991

Death Link by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor, The Storming Bone by Ian McDowell; Thomas and the Wise Men by Kristine Kathryn Rusch.

Skin Deep by Brian Stableford; The Drifter by Lawrence Watt-Evans; Wacky Jack 5.1 by W. R. Thompson; Line Item on a Dead Grant by Jack C. Haldeman II

November 1991 SOLD OUT

December 1991

Word Salad by Phillip C. Jennings: Touches by Gregory Benford: The Long Fall by Ben Bova; The Devil His Due by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff; Pay Any Price, Bear Any Burden by Ted Reynolds and William F. Wu

January 1992

The Round-Eyed Barbarians by L. Sprague de Camp; Natural Selection by Lawrence Watt-Evans; The Sleeping Serpent by Pamela Sargent

February 1992 Complications by Brian Stableford; In Brass Valley by Avram Davidson:

If There Be Cause by Sheila Finch; The Final Page by Phillip C. Jennings

Let Time Shape by George Zebrowski; The Call by John Morressy; Hiatus by Alexis Glynn Latner: Reawakening by Mark I. McGarry

April 1992

Missing Person by William F. Wu; Life in the Air by Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann; Isabella of Castile Answers Her Mail by James Morrow

May 1992

Blades of the Diram Ring by Barry B. Longyear; Going to Texas (Extradition Version) by Joe Clifford Faust: Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

June 1992

The Last Reunion by Harry Turtledove: Little Brother's Turn to Watch by Kevin O'Donnell, Ir.: The Red World and the Blue by Ben Boya

The Vortex by Phillip C. Jennings; Lennon Spex by Paul Di Filippo; In

and Out With Me by John Morressy; My Father's Face by Ian McDowell

Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love by Roger Zelazny; The Logic of Location by Alexander Jablokov; Last Wish by Martha Soukup September 1992

The Rock That Changed Things by Ursula K. Le Guin; Deconstruction Gang by Harry Turtledove: The Green by Barry B. Longvear _ANTHOLOGIES_

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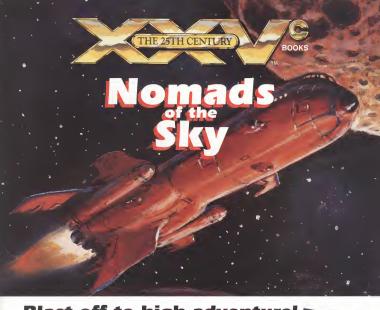
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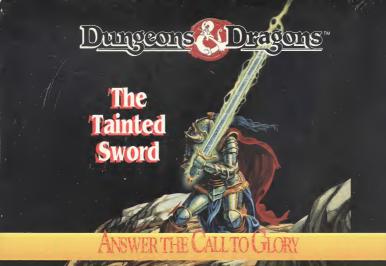
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